

PROFESSOR
**BERNICE
SUMMERFIELD**

THE BIG HUNT



LANCE PARKIN

BIG
FINISH

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**A Novel by
Lance Parkin**

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Professor Bernice Summerfield is enjoying a break. A break from work, a break from the rebuilding of the Braxiatel Collection and a break from Jason, Adrian and even her beloved Peter. She feels she's entitled to a bit of downtime. So, why won't anyone leave her alone? Before long, she's being sent off after an old space artefact only to crashland on a planet apparently devoid of life. Devoid of life, that is, except for the robotic animals, big game hunters and ruthless corporate administrators of the type she's learned to know and mistrust. Benny realises that to survive she must join in on what might be the most dangerous game she's ever played...

Over 300,000 Bernice Summerfield adventures sold since 1992!

Bernice Summerfield is an archaeologist from the 27th century. She is also fundamentally sane, which helps if you're travelling with people frequently on the edge of a nervous breakdown and others drifting towards the psychopathic. She's a party animal, revered on at least two planets as a goddess of indiscriminate drinking. She's also insecure enough to fake her academic credentials, emotional enough still to ache from her first romantic betrayal, sufficiently moral to regard her mentor's actions sceptically, and straightforward enough to tell him what she thought of him (most memorably in the outburst, 'Git! Git! Git!').

Plus she had a sense of humour.

With her detachment and perspective, the ability to appreciate others' needs and acknowledge different points of view, she grounds what could simply be a helter-skelter fantasy-adventure series. She rescues the books' ideas from abstraction, guaranteeing them a human reaction. And she brings a rueful depth of experience to adventures populated with various idealists and fanatics.

Benny has starred in novels inspired by panto, books that turned the universe inside-out, adventures that were larks, adventures that were serious, adventures that you weren't sure what they were. Courtesy of Lisa Bowerman, we've heard her voice in the Big Finish audios, in conversation with old husbands, as well as new friends, enemies and the occasional monster.

Hers is a varied and rewarding series...

*Adapted from an essay by
Lloyd Rose*

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A Holiday for the Professor

After one day, the fine white sand of the beaches, the gentle gold and blue light from the suns and the warm, green ocean no longer appealed. It had been a long time since Professor Bernice Summerfield had been alone, and there were *people* here.

She'd come here to relax. To get away from her job, which was also her home and where all her friends and family lived. There was nothing wrong with them, she loved them, of course she did. But recently, all her problems seemed to have been concentrated there. She had grown accustomed to a life of adventure and derring-do. But lately it had all got a little too... personal. A home was meant to be a haven. It was the place you returned to when your adventuring was done, a place you could sleep and soak in the bath and chat without the adventure coming after you. The monsters were meant to stay on the other side of the door.

This holiday wasn't exactly luxury, but there were serving robots and instructors, sunbathers and their children. Activities here were regimented, timetabled, managed. Certain meals were served at a certain time, the scheduled entertainment came and went like clockwork. This wasn't unpleasant – how could it be, where drinks were included in the price (an arrangement that Benny always felt she profited by), where the room was clean and quiet and where she'd already quietly declined the advances of one rather athletic-looking young man?

Benny wanted to be by herself, she didn't want a routine, however benevolent.

The next morning, she packed up a backpack with a few essentials and provisions, then slipped away from the hotel complex. There were no fences to climb, no walls to clamber over. This planet was virtually uninhabited, and there was no need for security. The moment she left the hotel grounds came as the neat lawn became a slightly more ragged one. This world was a mass of warm seas wrapped around islands that were either beach or woodland. There were no native viruses, no predators bigger than a squirrel, no insect life that she needed to worry about. She walked through the forest, leaving the lights of the hotel and the subterranean thumping of its dancehalls behind. It was a warm, pleasant evening, just as every evening here was. As she'd gone through the hotel lobby, some of the other guests had stopped to stare at her in her jeans and hiking boots. It was the local equivalent of wearing a suit of armour – almost everyone here,

including the handful of security personnel, got by barefoot, in swimwear.

The terrain here, even away from the areas tended by gardeners, was soft and even. She didn't need the shoes. The ground felt mossy. It undulated slightly, and there was a very slight upward incline. But it felt more like stepping on thick carpet than walking outside.

The planet was beautiful. She didn't know its history, and wasn't sure if it had been terraformed or unusually blessed by nature. She'd have guessed the former. Planets like this, so perfect for human life, didn't just spring up. Earth itself hadn't. It had taken billions of years for human life to emerge. And, even then, there were vast areas of the planet that were too hot, too dry, too cold, or too wet for human habitation. If the place that humans had come from wasn't perfect for humans, why would a world like this have sprung up without help? It seemed likely that this planet had been nudged into a slightly different orbit, or that the trees had been seeded by an early colony ship, or that there were weather-control stations discreetly dotted around.

Bernice looked up into the cobalt-blue dawn sky. It didn't make this place any less beautiful that it was terraformed. In an odd way, it made her more settled. This planet wasn't any less real than if it had been left alone. The trees were still trees, the air was still air. To think that something so wonderful had been contrived made Benny feel a little bit better about her fellow man. Lately, she'd met far too many human beings who liked hurting people and breaking things. It was all too easy to forget that the nice people far outnumbered the nasty ones. Even at her lowest ebb, even at her most cynical, she'd never doubted that.

The going didn't get any more difficult. By the time the sun was over the treetops, Benny was a little out of breath, her legs were getting a little sore. But only a very little. She found herself concentrating on her path ahead. The hotel seemed like a dream, now. A lifetime ago, she'd been in the military, and it had never quite left her. She found herself looking for snapped branches, footprints, incongruous sounds – there were any number of signs that even the most diligent person would leave if they were out here. But there was nothing. She was alone, warm and happy for the first time in a long time.

Benny plucked a couple of fruit – they looked like grapes, but they were the size of oranges – and found a rock to sit on. Expecting the most beautiful, rich taste, she was a little surprised how bland the fruit was. But it was juicy enough.

Benny closed her eyes. Just the barest rustle of leaves and faint birdsong. Good thoughts started to well up from deep inside her. Perfumes and sunlight. Memories of laughter, and love and sex.

Companionship, triumph.

Lying dead on a dark stone floor, facing a wall built from piled up skulls and thighbones.

Benny's eyes snapped open.

Was that memory even one of hers? Obviously she wasn't dead, but... she struggled to place it. So much had happened to her. She'd been hypnotised, possessed, telepathised and time-paradoxed so often. There were memories in there that definitely weren't hers, although she could usually pick them out without any trouble. It messed around with her sense of self, though. Some of the most basic details about her identity, who she really was, were missing or garbled nowadays. It wasn't just her memories. It was solid physical fact. She didn't know how old she was. She wasn't sure she could have worked it out. All that time travelling, moving around faster-than-light and suspended animation would be bad enough. But she'd faced things that could alter reality, causality and her physical form. Various things had added years and taken them away. She was about forty years old, but the sort of forty years old which had people registering surprise when they found out. And, whatever else she could say about her life, she'd packed a lot into those forty years.

No-one else was keeping track of it all, she realised. She'd never intended her diary entries to be entirely objective. Now, it seemed, she couldn't even trust her memories. It really wasn't any way for an archaeologist to behave.

Every archaeologist, at one point or another, thinks about what will happen when their body is dug up. It was an occupational hazard. What clues would she leave for posterity? How accurately could her successors be expected to piece together her life when she wasn't sure herself how everything fitted together?

This train of thought was precisely the sort of *angst* Benny had walked into the woods to avoid. She'd come here to be alone with herself. The twist being, of course, that she wasn't sure who that was, nowadays. She shouldn't have sat down, she concluded. Before then, the only thing that had been worrying her was walking. She stood and started walking again, but it wasn't the same. The spell had been broken.

Why hadn't she brought some vodka? Time was when she'd have been getting ready for a dig and she'd slip a little bottle of something in her bag before she packed her trowel. She sighed. It was probably a good thing she'd not done that for a while, a sign of maturity. Although it might equally be a sign of encroaching senility.

More walking – Benny had, by now, lost track of the time, which had always been part of the exercise – led her to a small brook. She followed it. The water, of course, was clear. There were glimpses of

colourful fish in there. At least she presumed they were fish, all she saw were little dashes of purple and blue.

The brook led to a natural dip in the ground. At the bottom, the water had collected into a pool. Benny stopped at the edge and peered down. She could see the bottom, although it must have been thirty feet down. More dashes of colour.

It was practically a written invitation. Benny hesitated for a moment, listened out. But there was no-one here. There hadn't been a footprint or the smallest piece of litter since she'd left the hotel grounds. No-one came out here. Why would they come to this pool, when the hotel had terrace after terrace of water slides, diving boards, hot tubs and wave machines?

She wondered about going naked. There was no-one around, it was certainly warm enough, and she wasn't prudish about it. Not even slightly self-conscious. Yesterday, she'd been lounging by the pool in a three piece swimming costume made from almost a negative amount of material. So why even debate, she asked herself. She realised why after a moment's thought. All those tans, hardbodies and beach fashions... it was exactly the sort of *competition* she wanted to avoid. She wasn't here to be bold – and with no-one around, how bold was skinny-dipping anyway?

Benny took off her boots, jeans and a bracelet she was worried might slip off in the water. Some human instinct made her tuck her bag beneath a rock, out of sight. She stood by the water, hands on hips, tried to rid herself of the nagging feeling she had.

There's no-one around.

You are not being watched.

Which is a shame, she thought, looking down. She'd always had good legs and they'd only improved with age.

'Vanity, thy name is woman,' she said and, as she did so, realised it was the first time she'd spoken the whole day.

Benny looked down at the water. It shimmered in the sunlight. She imagined plunging in, feeling the warmth surround her. She'd try to keep her eyes open. So many cultures had rituals involving water purification rituals, like the Christian baptism. A person would emerge from the water renewed. This was the way to lose herself in her surroundings. Alone with her body, no thoughts.

Benny threw herself into the water.

Which was almost freezing cold.

Her nose and mouth were filled with liquid, but she couldn't cough it out.

Her mind, which hadn't planned to play any part in proceedings for the next few minutes, now watched on, horrified. Benny tried to kick her legs, but nothing happened. She could feel herself sweating – what

was that all about, the water was freezing? – she felt like she was going to be sick. Her heart was pounding away.

She'd been in the water for *seconds*.

Her legs, more tired from the walking than she'd realised, were cramped. They'd seized up.

She was sinking.

Only now did Benny appreciate just how far down thirty feet was a little over five times her own height, and many times deeper than the deepest artificial swimming pool.

She got one of her hands to move... it brushed against the wet moss of the side of the pool, but there was nothing to grab onto.

Lying dead on a dark stone floor, facing a wall built from piled up skulls and thighbones.

So, it turns out your life does flash in front of your eyes. She was surprised, with her history of death-defying escapes, that she didn't know that already. Perhaps it only worked when you really were about to die.

Benny's eyes snapped open again.

Not like this.

Damn you, Benny. Not like this.

If those legs are so good, then why aren't they kicking?

She kicked her legs, arrested her fall a little. Kicked them again, and stayed still. Kicked them a third time and started heading up.

She could see the sunlight above her. There was nothing now, just her kicking hard so that she'd reach that light.

Wasn't this what dead people were meant to see? A bright light ahead? There were thousands of documented near-death experiences that followed that pattern.

Near death was good enough for the moment. Better than the alternative.

Another kick, and her head burst out of the water. She coughed and breathed in air at the same time, leading to further coughing, needing air and a little bit of sinking.

Benny grabbed the man's hand, and he pulled her out of the water.

She sat splayed at the side of the pool, coughing up water, letting the sun warm her up. Thank the Goddess no-one could see her like this, with blue skin, red eyes and the few clothes she had on in various states of transparency and indignity.

The man smiled down at her, and offered his hand for her to shake. 'Bernice Summerfield, I presume?'

He wore a sharp, dark suit, was in his thirties, and his face had a male model sort of thing going, but not taken to ridiculous levels. He clearly worked out, but wasn't a bodybuilder. He had blue eyes and black hair cut fashionably.

‘My name is Mason.’

He wasn’t human.

Benny coughed up the last of the water, then stood, a little shakily. He helped her up, smiling just a little too well. Benny retrieved a towel from her bag.

‘You knew I was here.’

He nodded.

‘You shouldn’t swim alone, even on a hot day’ he told her. ‘Water temperature rarely matches air temperature. It’s easy to get caught out.’

Benny looked him in the eye.

‘You’re a manlike,’ she told him.

If he’d been human, his smile might have flickered, his eyes might have registered surprise. As it was, he cocked his head a little a carefully calculated angle, designed to mimic genuine body language.

‘I’ve met your kind before,’ she told him. Mason was an android – not a mechanical man, but flesh and blood. Not a clone, either, but a unique being. An artificial human, with authored DNA, grown in a vat and implanted with a personality and knowledge.

‘Even so,’ he said, ‘most humans are incapable of telling the difference between my kind and theirs.’

‘I Can’t Believe It’s Not Human,’ Benny said.

‘An adaptation of an advertising slogan from the twentieth century,’ he replied. ‘According to your file, it is the period that you specialise in.’

Benny wasn’t surprised she had a file, but did wonder how this person had got hold of it. ‘What else does my file say?’ she asked.

‘That you claim to have extensive knowledge of body language. You have, of course, had contact with many forms of non-human life. Taken together, that should lead to a far higher than average ability to distinguish between humans and humanoids’ He ran a smile subroutine, the same one he’d run before.

‘You transmatted down?’ Obvious enough – she hadn’t been followed, he hadn’t been here, and he hadn’t flown in.

‘Yes’

‘You have a ship. You plan to take me there.’ If he’d have come from the hotel – or anywhere else on the planet – he’d have transmatted over. And he was alone, without a bag, a gun or anything but the suit.

‘Indeed.’

‘Well, you can either wait until I’ve towelled myself off, or just ask whoever’s operating the transmat to leave the water behind when he beams us up. Either’s good for me’

A moment later, the drops of water that had been on Benny’s body,

soaking her clothes or trapped in her hair, found that nothing was supporting them. They fell, a tiny, unexpected rain shower on an island with a perfect, regulated climate.

There was one priority, Benny decided: she had to assert her authority.

She had arrived in the transmat cubicles of a large, well-appointed spacecraft. At first, it had felt like it was a luxury passenger ship. But those were essentially giant flying hotels – this was a different order of opulence. The paintings and sculptures that decorated the corridors were too expensive to be left around for the *hoi polloi* to look at. The carpet was too nice to have just anyone walking on it. This was like a private yacht, but far, far too big. This was the sort of ship that had ‘wings’ in the sense palaces had them, not in the sense that aeroplanes did.

Whoever owned this place must have thought they held all the cards. They were clearly rich, powerful and resourceful. It was Benny’s job to try to gain the upper hand. Simple primate dominance stuff demonstrate an alpha personality, try to act as if she owned the place, that she knew more than her hosts, that she was completely relaxed and in control.

Vital to this strategy was that she ignored the fact she wasn’t wearing any trousers.

They weren’t very nice knickers, that was the problem. She *had* nice underwear, somewhere. These were... okay. They were, at least, relatively new. They were clean – they had been even before her little exploit in the cold water. They were of sufficient size. They weren’t as small as those adorning the young ladies in a lads’ mag, they weren’t so large as those worn by the irrepressible and heart-warming heroines of chick lit. They covered what needed to be covered, yet weren’t so large they provoked a reaction of, for example, ‘My God, Benny, did you steal those from a hippo?’

The point was to ignore the underwear thing. In fact, in the best tradition of judo, Benny decided she should turn this weakness into a strength. Gosh, she must really be confident and powerful if she can confront... er, whoever she was going to confront... dressed only in a shirt and knickers.

Judo wasn’t about turning your weakness into a strength, she recalled. It was about turning your enemy’s strength against him.

Mason indicated that their final destination was through the next set of doors.

Benny took a deep breath, and cleared her mind. She was in charge. She was a powerful, confident alpha human.

The doors opened and Benny walked through.

It was a small office, luxuriously appointed.

‘Bernice Summerfield,’ Mason announced. ‘This is Orlean Wolvencroft.’

The man in the room studied her carefully. Benny did the same. A businessman, slightly overweight. Forty, if he was a day, she thought, before realising that he was actually a lot older than her. He was definitely a human being, not a manlike.

Benny willed herself to remember the plan. Dominance. She’s in charge. She’s the top dog.

‘Hello,’ she said, with a confidence that made her feel good, and strangely powerful.

‘Coffee?’ he offered.

‘Yes,’ she said, decisively. ‘Please,’ she added.

A serving robot – a sleek, modern one – whirled over and handed her a cup.

Benny took it, careful not to break eye contact with this Orlean Wolvencroft.

She grasped the cup in one hand, tried hard not to wince when she realised it was hot.

‘I’m not wearing trousers,’ she informed him, with steely determination.

Orlean Wolvencroft’s face fell. ‘Er... no he replied. ‘I wasn’t going to mention it. Would you like to know why I asked you here?’

Benny floundered a little. ‘Yes?’ she decided, eventually.

‘You don’t recognise my name.’

‘No offence, but it’s the sort of name I’d remember if I’d ever heard it.’

He nodded.

‘Do you know what a Von Neumann probe is?’

Benny had heard *that* name, and she began flicking through her memory trying to place it. It could be anything, from a medical instrument to a bizarre sexual practice, but within a couple of seconds, she had it:

‘It’s a spacecraft. An early, unmanned one.’

Wolvencroft looked pleased.

‘This was the twenty-first century,’ Benny added. ‘I’m more of a late twentieth century girl, myself.’

Wolvencroft’s face fell. ‘So you don’t know anything about them but the name?’

Benny thought about it for a moment.

‘Right... in the twenty-first century, manned space travel was still enormously expensive. This was before gravity plating was developed, so every kilogram of payload added a fortune to the launch costs. And it was slow. So the Earth authorities sent out hundreds of unmanned

probes, instead. Then, when the hyperdrive was developed, unmanned probes were sent on ahead of manned missions to other star systems.'

Wolvencroft nodded. 'To do what?'

'They were sent to the first colony worlds – what are now the Inner Planets – to prepare them for human habitation. They'd set up solar arrays, communications, prepare the soil and plant crops and build the first habitats.'

'You've missed a key point.'

Benny considered this for a moment. 'Ah yes – the thing that distinguished a Von Neumann probe was that it was adaptive. Other probes – like the ones at the Martian poles – tended to have one set of instructions, and they'd just keep following them. One probe managed to land on Arcturus and start to build a city, completely missing the fact that the planet was already inhabited, because that was outside the scope of its programming. The Von Neumann ones had a set of objectives instead, and enough intelligence and adaptability to decide the best way of achieving those objectives, depending what they found on the planets. They were programmed to build whatever they needed.'

'... and because of that, there are no unspoiled examples.'

'Of... ?'

'The probes. I should explain: I'm a collector of early space hardware. I own the Eagle Museum on the Moon, and –'

'– at least three sites on Mars. Yes. I've done you a disservice, I have seen your name.'

'The probes landed, then quickly reconfigured themselves. It was an irreversible process, once they'd decided on a course of action. A bit like breaking an egg – they could become scrambled, poached, boiled or fried.'

'Or they could become a chicken,' added Benny.

'Indeed. But they couldn't go back to being eggs afterwards. That's my point.'

He tapped his desk, and a grainy hologram appeared over it. It was a representation of a space probe. As Wolvencroft spoke, it began rotating slowly on its axis.

'As you'll see, the probes were very small. They were powered with early fusion drives.'

'Mr Wolvencroft, this is fascinating stuff, but I don't see why you're interrupting my holiday to tell me this.'

'Do you often go on drowning excursions?' Mason asked.

'You promised you would tell me why I'm here,' Benny reminded Wolvencroft.

'I want an unmodified Von Neumann probe for my collection,' he told her.

'You just said there's no such thing.'

'There wasn't thought to be. But not every one was accounted for.'

'Space travel was a risky business at first. Some politicians said we shouldn't even bother, it was so risky. They just didn't see that if you lost one in two probes, that was an argument to send *more*, not less.'

'Probes were lost. There were any number of reasons why, everything from smashing into planets and asteroids to simple mechanical faults with their transmitters.'

'You've found one.'

Wolvencroft smiled. 'Oh... they're found all the time. Or at least fragments of them are. I've discovered one that's completely unaccounted for.'

He tapped the desk again, and the hologram display changed to show a flight path. It started at Earth, arced out of the Solar System, then became a dotted line.

'Eagle 11-32. Launched in 2040, heading spinwards at about point two five c.'

'Heading where?'

'The binary system Groombridge 34. It didn't get there.'

Benny was studying the map. 'What's that? About eleven light years from Earth? You think it overshot?'

'I think there's a good chance.'

'You want me to find it?'

'You're the ideal candidate, Bernice Summerfield.'

The hologram changed again, and now there was a life-size, rotating Benny hovering over the desk. It was a younger Benny, one in jeans and an orange jumper. What had happened to that jumper, she wondered. She'd been fond of it, but she hadn't seen it in years.

Her credentials, real and imagined, scrolled around the hologram. A list of her publications and other notable achievements scrolled past, in the opposite direction. Perhaps someone was keeping track of her life, after all.

'My area of study is the twentieth century,' she reminded him. 'This is fifty years after –'

'There's no difference', Wolvencroft interrupted. 'So it's a little out of your period? Big deal. You're a field archaeologist. You're a professor. You're an experienced adventurer.'

'I'm also on holiday.'

'I'll pay.'

'That's not what motivates –'

Wolvencroft typed out something on a credit screen and passed it to her. Benny read the numbers, then tried very hard not to look like she was accepting an oversized cheque from the head of a lottery company.

‘Um... well... this is certainly a useful amount of money.’

‘Yes it is. It covers your expenses. If you find the probe, you can keep the change and I’ll give you the same amount of money again.’

Benny considered the offer for a moment. How difficult would it be to find? Switching back to the hologram of its flight path, she circled her finger where the probe *had* to be, swirling up the hologram a little. Locating it would be a task substantially harder than finding a needle in a haystack, but it was a game with rules.

The probe was moving on a known course. It was moving at a known speed, and slowly – relatively at any rate. It couldn’t go any faster, it could, of course, have slowed down or been slowed down at some point in the last five and a half centuries. It could have drifted off course, but there would have had to be a reason.

There was only one area of space where it could be. It was an area that encompassed three star systems, but very little else. The systems were on the edge of the Petuarian Sector. Not on the trade routes, but they had been fully charted both before and after the Galactic Wars. There were no inhabited planets, no settlements, no research stations, no important minerals or anything of scientific or strategic value. The cartographers wouldn’t have been looking for a probe, so the fact they hadn’t found it didn’t mean anything.

It was a challenge, but it was doable. Not easy – but not that difficult, either. And it ought to be fun.

Benny accepted the offer.

2

Captain Benny

Later that day, Benny had checked out of the hotel and had booked a seat on an express rocket to the Petuarian Sector. It was a forty-hour trip.

The rocket was the fastest way to get there – this class of ship was actually a little faster than hyperspace radio communications. Benny knew very little about this sort of thing. She knew that radio waves only travelled at the speed of light, and so hyperspace radio didn't really use radio waves. She seemed to remember someone telling her once that it didn't really use hyperspace, either.

This didn't bother Benny: the screwdrivers the stewardess kept on serving her didn't really have screwdrivers in them, either.

They were heading to Petuaria, administrative centre of the sector, a big transport hub that wasn't close enough to Earth to be an Inner Planet, but which wasn't as remote and barren as any of the Outer Worlds. Benny had heard the name of the planet, but couldn't think of anything or anyone interesting who'd come from it or done anything interesting there. A quick check of the datanet demonstrated that it was the home planet of a music group she'd never heard of, an actress she vaguely remembered seeing in something and it was 'famous' for a type of fruit that tasted like oranges, only not quite as nice and five times as expensive.

There were, in other words, roughly a thousand planets just like it within a week's flight from here. Benny took the details of a few suppliers and agencies she needed. She ordered some provisions and hired some equipment without leaving her seat. There were some things that would have to wait until she arrived at the planet, but that wouldn't be a problem.

It took about six hours on her seat's onboard computer to come up with a model of the probe's flight path. The task was a little trickier than she'd thought, but the computer was able to check the databases and rule out sections of the search area because they were on busy routes or in other inhabited areas. It ran through a number of options, and how long those options would take. State of the art military detection equipment and a ship as fast as the express rocket, and the search wouldn't take more than a week. Benny compromised a little, and came up with a plan that couldn't possibly take more than two.

With a bit of luck, it ought to be done in a couple of days. It was entirely possible, of course, that she'd find it the first place she looked, and would be back on Petuaria within an hour or two.

She'd need an exploration ship. They were easy enough to hire from the local authorities, but if she went to a university with a decent science department, Benny reckoned she could lease a ship that came with a free graduate nerd to help her. She'd need a pilot – again, easy enough through an agency. There was no need to skimp on either of those. She'd also pick a ship that at least had light armaments. It seemed to be one of the laws of physics that the more peaceful somewhere looked, the more vicious the alien hordes lurking there probably were.

The express rocket was a neat little way to travel – quiet enough and comfortable enough to get some sleep, but with enough to do when she was awake. It was a lot better than some of the methods of transport she'd endured over the years.

As the journey continued, Benny came to the realisation that this was her dream holiday. Something with a straightforward goal, but which took her somewhere new, made her think about new things and in new ways.

The drink they served on this leg of the trip was also good stuff.

Petuarria was a planet about the size of Earth (most colony planets were, for obvious reasons), but it only had a population in the hundreds of millions. As Benny stepped down a main thoroughfare in the capital city, looking for the university, she noted that this lack of population hadn't stopped the Petuarrianalonnions from spreading across as much of the surface of their planet as they could. Few buildings here were more than single storey, and most had generous driveways and sculpted gardens. There were no native tree species, the planet – at least this bit of it – had no mountain ranges. Benny was one of the taller people around.

It was a bit like seeing the world through a letterbox. Everything that happened was happening in what seemed to Benny to be framed in a four inch slit in front of her face. She never once had to look up. When she did so, all there was to see was a cloudless light green sky.

The flat little buildings all looked like they'd been laid out at the same time. Perhaps centuries ago, when humanity had swept through this part of the galaxy, yet it was all so neat and clean that it could have been a few weeks ago. The people here tended towards the brightly coloured poncho end of what the rest of the galaxy would find acceptably fashionable, but they seemed polite enough.

The university campus wasn't very large, even smeared out in more single storey buildings. However, the place Benny was heading was obvious enough – the hangars of the faculty's private spaceport soared to three or maybe even four floors.

'Bernice Summerfield?' The voice was a rather thin female one, its

owner was a little more meaty and androgynous than that. Benny admonished herself. This was a perfectly ordinary-looking young woman in a chunky sweater and thick glasses.

Benny held out her hand. 'Hi.'

'I'm Noele Flynn, I'm going to be your research assistant.'

Benny had posted ahead, asking for a technician to help twiddle the knobs on the detection equipment. She'd expected a man, for some reason. There was a reason she'd wanted a male assistant. Political correctness, probably – not many men went into the sciences, and she always liked to do her bit.

'I'd expected someone from the manufacturer, not a postgraduate.' Flynn deflated a little. 'I'm fully rated on the *Sataspes*.' She hesitated. 'And I'm not a postgrad. Not yet, anyway.'

Benny sighed.

'I can do this,' Flynn insisted.

'You're an expert on twenty-first century space probes?'

'I've studied them, yes. You haven't.'

Benny glared at her.

'I've not read your books, but I've had a quick check. This is the first time you've ever looked for anything in space, isn't it?'

'The Vartaq Veil –'

'Oh, come on, that was nothing like this. I've done fieldwork with satellites in low orbit, bringing them in and repairing them. The whole job – detection, capture, zero-G EVA to repair, release.'

It hadn't occurred to Benny that, once she'd found this probe she'd have to bring it onboard somehow. But presumably that was what Wolvencroft wanted.

'Besides,' Flynn continued, 'the rates you're paying, did you really think you'd get anyone with qualifications? This is a tricky job.'

Benny was beginning to wonder about that. But she was warming to Flynn.

'Okay,' Benny agreed.

If she'd expected the girl to be overjoyed at the news, Benny would have been disappointed. She just nodded, like it was the only possible answer.

'Who's the pilot?' Benny asked. 'I hope he's actually left school.'

'Johannsen,' Flynn said. 'Agency pilot. I don't know the name. When I went to the office this morning, they told me he'd arrived and was checking over the ship.'

They were walking towards the hangar now 'Have you seen it yet?'

'Oh yeah, the faculty only have three ships. It's pretty standard stuff. I hope you've not brought too much luggage, though.'

Benny had precisely one small suitcase, and that was full of stuff she'd packed for holiday – flip flops, a bikini, suntan lotion, a

paperback copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, two changes of underwear and a couple of brightly coloured T-shirts.

The *Sataspes* wasn't large, but it was about what Benny had been expecting. It was a functional ship, a roughly spherical clump of modules resting on a spindly undercarriage. It was kept up (and aerodynamic, when it was flying in an atmosphere) by a web of antigravity generators. Benny walked around the ship, making sure all the bits she'd asked for were there. The hab module was about the size of a camper van. The control pod it was bolted to was smaller than that. It had the only window (or porthole, or whatever they were called on a spaceship), a transparent dome that faced forward and was about three metres across. There was an engine pod about the size of the hab module. There were a couple of sets of mechanical arms, sprouting at odd angles underneath the ship. The port side of the ship was dominated by a vast radio telescope dish and various other things that either looked like or must have been detectors, antennae, sensors and the like.

'Professor Summerfield?'

Johannsen was walking towards them, wiping his hands on a rag. Behind him, a couple of robots were scooting away with a large metal barrel of something or other.

Benny held out her hand. Johannsen beamed at her and shook it. He was really rather neat. He wore a smart jumpsuit. He was clean shaven, and wore a plain gold neck chain. Benny was expecting someone a little more dirty – someone who spent their life with their head under the bonnet. She was suddenly a little nervous, the same feeling she got going into a restaurant where she was the only customer. Something must be wrong.

He had a firm handshake, though.

'Are we shipshape?' Benny asked, sounding for all the world like the most lubbery landlubber in human history.

'She's nearly ready. You said this evening? We'll be able to leave before then'

'I'm Noele Flynn,' Flynn chipped in. 'Is everything online?'

'It's all connected up, Noele. I'm guessing you'll want to run tests? I'll show you up there'

Benny checked her watch, then realised it wasn't set for local time. Johannsen glanced at his wrist computer. 'It's eleven seventy two, just gone. We could be ready at four alpha nine'

Benny remembered why she hadn't reset her watch – it hadn't got the range for a thirty-two hour day and decimalised time.

'That's about six o'clock, standard?' she guessed.

Flynn and Johannsen both nodded.

‘I’ve got paperwork to do. I’ll be back here in plenty of time for that. Launch set at, er, four alpha nine’

‘Aye aye, Captain,’ both Johannsen and Flynn said automatically, somewhat alarming Benny.

It was getting dark by the time Benny returned, which was – as best she could tell – about four eighty in the evening. The ship had been wheeled out onto the launch pad and was picked out by spotlights. Benny had a good look while a robot scanned some of her paperwork and stamped the necessary permits. Johannsen and Flynn were supervising the loading on of the last few storage crates.

Benny was in a jumpsuit she’d bought that afternoon, a close-fitting, padded all-in-one thing that was comfortable and practical. It was quite flattering, in its way. Johannsen and Flynn were wearing jumpsuits, too. Flynn’s looked new, and she may even have hired it. It didn’t quite fit – a little loose at the chest, a little tight at the thighs. Johannsen’s was reassuringly old and faded – he, at least, had flown before.

Johannsen held out a hand to greet Benny. ‘Just fitting the drinking water canister, then we’re ready to go. Your luggage arrived, and Noele stowed it in your cabin’

He helped Benny up into the ship.

It was cramped, and dark. She hadn’t expected the luxury of Wolvencroft’s ship, but this was more like a twentieth-century bathyscaphe than a modern starship.

‘I’ll give you the tour if you want,’ Johannsen said. Then, with a sweeping gesture of his hand: ‘control module... hab module... science module... engine module’

Benny looked around.

‘I’ll show you our cabin,’ Flynn said.

Benny remembered why she’d wanted a male researcher. There were only two cabins, there were three people in the crew. One person got a room to herself... or himself, in this case. Damn!

The hab module was brighter. Everything was stowed away in cupboards and compartments. There was a small food machine tucked into one corner, comfy seating and a small entertainment system. Three doors – one to each cabin, one to the washroom.

Flynn helped Benny clip some kit to her jumpsuit. There was a medical monitor, a small toolkit, a communicator. As they finished up, they could hear hatches closing outside the ship.

‘Nearly ready,’ Johannsen said, over the intercom. Benny could hear his actual voice carrying over from the control pod.

Flynn and Benny headed that way. Three padded seats, facing each other, with instruments and controls built into the arm, and covering

every surface. The two women strapped themselves in as Johannsen completed pre-flight checks.

Benny looked at her crewmates. 'Best of luck, you two. I'm sure we'll do a great job. Okay... launch at my mark, Mr Johannsen.'

'Er... captain, we're already launched.'

Benny looked out the window. The pale green sky was darkening, and within moments it was the familiar inky black of space. The ship fed into a flight lane that led it out between Petuaria's two moons. Once clear of those, it slipped into hyperspace, with a barely audible crunch.

Benny sat in her cabin, her diary on her knee and started to write.

Captain's log.

The Sataspes is heading into the search area, at a little under maximum speed. We've been under way for almost a day, we'll be arriving in a few hours. This is a small ship, and the three of us are quickly getting to know each other. Johannsen – I don't think he's got a first name, or perhaps that is his first name – is pleasant enough, if a little dull. Noele Flynn is perky, enthusiastic and a bit wearing, frankly. But if I had to be locked up in a metal barrel with a couple of strangers, I could do a lot worse. With a crew of three one of whom is asleep at any one time – I'm expected to muck in with running the ship, and that means several hours actual splicing the mainbrace type work every day. We're all doing a bit of everything, but we have assigned duties. With Johannsen flying the ship and Flynn running tests on the detectors – and cooking and cleaning – that means I'm the ship's engineer. Me! Anyway, the fusion engine is ticking over nicely, and to be honest it looks after itself. It's the quietest starship engine I've ever heard, then again it's hardly the most powerful.

Benny heard Flynn laughing. It sounded like it came from the control pod. It was good that everyone was getting on okay.

'Everything okay, Noele?' Johannsen asked. Benny had to concentrate to hear it, but the control pod was only a thin wall and about ten feet away.

'It's all working just fine. Nothing much to do.'

'I know the feeling. We're on auto pilot, the ship's flying itself.'

'Mind if I join you?'

'Not at all. So... what do you think of Benny?'

Benny's ears pricked up and she strained to hear the answer.

'She's nice,' Flynn giggled.

'But...'

'But nothing.'

'No? Come on – she's asleep by now.'

'Okay. There's something weird about her.'

'Weird?'

'I've got this theory. Okay. Don't laugh.'

'I won't laugh. You're not a funny person.'

What sounded like a playful shove.

'Okay... I think she's a robot.' Flynn said. Benny frowned. She must have misheard that.

'A robot?' Johannsen asked.

'Well, a humanoid. Flesh and blood, but artificial.'

'No-one can tell the difference.'

'Yeah, but you always can, can't you?'

'I've never met a manlike. Not that I know of.'

'I thought you were Mr Experienced Star Pilot Man.'

'Yeah, I am'

'Experienced, eh?'

The two of them were giggling together.

Benny found that she was burning bright red. Why would Flynn think she was a robot? What had she done that was even faintly robotic? She started running through every encounter she'd had with Flynn. Even after a day in close proximity, there wasn't that much to remember. Benny thought she'd been nothing but professional, friendly and reasonable.

She thought about going to the control pod and asking Flynn point blank why she would think such a thing.

Then she heard Flynn give a little muffled gasp. Murmurs... words from Johannsen Benny couldn't quite hear, and didn't really want to. A sound like a flightsuit being unzipped.

They've known each other less than a day.

Benny then added:

She's young enough to be my daughter.

Yikes.

It was true, though. If Noele Flynn was still at university, then her parents could be younger than Benny. Several years younger, in fact. Johannsen was also a decade younger. Benny would have rebuffed any advances from the pilot... but that didn't mean she didn't wish it had at least occurred to him before making a beeline for the only other person within a light year. Mentally, Benny had tagged her crew as all being about the same age, but she was by far the oldest.

It shouldn't matter.

This didn't matter.

She didn't look that old, anyway.

Perhaps that was because humanoids don't age at the same rate as

people?

Stop it!

Benny decided to try to sleep.

We start our search tomorrow. Who knows, perhaps we'll even finish it tomorrow, too.

Ten days later, Benny re-read those words and sighed.

Flynn was doing her best, but nothing was showing up on the scanners. At first, Benny and Johannsen had joined her in the sensor pod, and they'd sat around waiting for something to appear on a screen or trigger an alarm.

Nothing.

All they were doing was confirming the accuracy of the maps. They'd found asteroids exactly where they'd expected them. They'd observed a number of comets in one system, and done what they were meant to, and put in a claim as their discoverers – only to hear back from Petuaria that the comets were already known and in the databases.

Mostly they found nothing. Space was big and empty. Ninety per cent of the time, they weren't finding anything bigger than hydrogen. It was getting a little frustrating.

They knew the speed the probe was travelling, they knew its trajectory. In theory, this was like watching someone throwing a ball into the air, then trying to see where it landed.

They'd all got a little tense. They weren't blaming one another, but there was a tangible sense now that they were collectively making a bit of a dog's breakfast of a simple task.

Now, Johannsen and Benny usually spent their time in the seating area of the hab pod. He and Flynn were still snuggling up every chance they got, but they never spoke about it when Benny was around. Did they think she didn't know? Were they relying on her discretion? The main thing was that they were both acting professionally on duty, and the relationship wasn't getting in the way of their work. Benny's main concern was that it was proving tricky to avoid them – this was a small ship, and she found herself pretending to be asleep or confining herself to the engine room more than she wanted to.

Neither Flynn nor Johannsen had acted any differently towards her. Perhaps they'd both forgotten Flynn's theory that Benny was a robot. Benny certainly hadn't, and it still frustrated her to have been so misjudged.

Benny was poring over the research data, checking it against the scanner read-outs.

'How well do people know this sector?' she asked.

‘There’s not much reason to come out this way,’ Johannsen told her. ‘To be honest, most of this sector is a dead loss.’

‘It’s pretty well charted.’

‘We’re not that far from Earth. If there was anything worth colonising, it would have been colonised centuries ago.’

‘This is going to seem like a stupid question.’

‘Okay...’

‘Are there any rumours? Travellers’ tales? Lost civilisations? Abandoned superweapons? Sleeping armies of robot killers? Haunted space freighters?’

Johannsen laughed. ‘I heard that Leon Uston, the guy who flies one of the express rockets wears a toupee. Is that the sort of thing you mean?’

‘Er... no.’

‘To be honest, we’re in a pretty boring sector of space.’

It was Benny’s turn to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Space being boring. When this probe was launched, space was the great unknown. Every time a probe got anywhere, humanity discovered a dozen new ways the universe worked. Saw things no man had ever seen.’

‘The great adventure. It’s hard to believe, now.’

Benny smiled. ‘Not always. Not if you travel far enough.’

‘I’d have thought you’d have seen it all. You’ve led an interesting life.

Flynn was telling me.’ Pretending they weren’t on first-name terms, when he’d called her ‘Noele’ right from the start.

‘I’ve seen a lot of the galaxy,’ Benny confirmed. ‘The more you see, the more you realise you’ll never see it all.’

The data pad Benny was holding was beeping.

‘You got something?’ Johannsen asked.

Benny squinted at the display. ‘Maybe...’

‘Okay,’ Benny explained to the other two, a couple of minutes later, in the sensor pod. ‘How are we getting on?’

‘Nothing,’ Flynn admitted.

‘How is it that people could track space probes in the twenty-first century, before the space detector had been invented?’ Johannsen asked.

‘Ah; said Flynn, ‘I’ve been looking into that. They couldn’t track them using optical telescopes, of course, the probes were too small. They tracked them... er... you’re not going to like this. They used the Doppler shift of the radio signal.’

Johannsen sighed.

Benny licked her lips before speaking. 'It's not so much I don't like what you just said, it's more a case of total incomprehension.'

'Doppler shift,' said Flynn.

'Er...'

'Come on, Professor.'

'Oh, wait. Yes. Doppler shift. Like when a police siren sounds different as the car whizzes past you.'

'That's right. If you've got a computer, you can analyse the sound and work out where the probe is.'

'But the probe we're looking for isn't sending out a signal.'

'No. But I came up with this. It's a model based on the probe drifting point four one off course.'

'That's a long way.'

'It is. And then there's a further deflection, because it arrived... here in 2371, and at that point, stellar activity... here... would have knocked it another point one from the original projected course.'

Benny was studying the data. 'It's possible...' she said, knowing her tone of voice practically announced just the opposite.

'It's only a short way from here,' Johannsen said.

Time for a command decision.

So Benny nodded.

The ship dropped out of hyperspace, and Benny immediately wished it hadn't.

She had been standing in the engine room, expecting to see the power level indicators dropping down. Instead, she saw her feet whip up over her head, and the floor sloshing around above her. She crashed to the deck, her head narrowly avoiding the edge of the engine itself.

The ship lurched again.

Benny just concentrated on the engine read-outs, dreading the idea that something she'd done had caused this. Everything was working fine, no alarms or buzzers were sounding.

The ship rolled over, and seemed to want to do the same thing again, but it stabilised.

'I think I've got it,' Johannsen announced over the intercom.

The ship was now steady. Benny pulled herself onto her feet. 'Report,' she told the intercom. She was already heading to the control pod, and got there in time to hear Johannsen explain.

'We left hyperspace, and hit a gravity storm,' he told her.

Benny dredged her memory 'Aren't those all charted?'

'Oh yeah. In theory, anyway. They're areas of turbulence caused by usually massive planets or weird alignments within a solar system.'

Benny peered out of the window. 'Are we where we thought we

would be?’

‘We are. This is System 81.’

Flynn had joined them. ‘Half the detectors have been knocked out. I think we hit some unusual solar activity. There are three giant planets close to the star, I think that’s creating shockwaves.’

Johannsen nodded. ‘Yes. That makes sense.’

Benny took their word for it. ‘Does that mean we can predict the disturbances?’

Johannsen tapped a couple of commands into his computer. ‘Give or take. We’ll have to be careful. And we’ll need to get a lot further away from the sun before we can fire the hyperdrive. Using the antigrays will be like stepping on eggshells, too.’

Flynn was checking a monitor. ‘We’re within a few billion miles of where the probe should be.’

‘Wouldn’t it have been destroyed?’ Benny asked.

‘No. At least, not like this. We’re affected because our engine warps gravity. The probe’s much more primitive. Some of its systems might have gone offline, but it ought to be able to ride the gravity waves.’

‘There’s an Earth-like planet,’ Flynn told them.

‘There isn’t,’ Johannsen insisted.

‘At ninety million miles from the sun.’ She was staring at the monitor, and relayed a set of coordinates.

Johannsen checked the data. ‘Wow.’

‘This wasn’t on the charts at all?’

‘Nope. All we have on the charts are the three gas giants.’

‘So, how have people missed this?’ Benny asked. ‘They’ve been mapping this part of space for five hundred years. We’ve been out here for most of that.’

Flynn was clearly excited. ‘The gravity waves are big enough to obscure a planet. Bigger than the charts say.’

‘Like I said,’ Johannsen added, ‘no ships ever come out this way.’

‘So... I discovered a planet?’

Benny smiled. ‘We’ll log it as Flynnworld, don’t worry.’

Flynn giggled. ‘I’ll radio the claim back to Petuaria right away.’

‘You do that. Right: the mission of the probe was to find an Earth-like planet, touch down and prepare it for human habitation. It ended up here, there’s an Earth-like planet. I’m sure you can see where I’m going with the logic of this one.’

‘If the probe landed and deployed, it won’t be intact,’ Flynn pointed out. ‘Wolvencroft wants it pristine.’

Benny hadn’t had time to think that far ahead. ‘Well... if that happened, it happened and we can’t do anything about that now.’

They could see it through the front observation port. It was only a tiny green dot against a starfield of tiny white dots, but it was obvious

enough.

Benny took a deep breath.

‘At least we know where it is. Take us in, Mr Johannsen. A little more slowly than that. Slowly. No. Er... Johannsen?’

The green dot was now about the size of a coin, and was only getting larger.

‘We’re being pulled in!’ Johannsen shouted: You might want to strap yourself down.’

3

Welcome to the Jungle

The emergency hatch popped open, and threw itself about ten feet out into the jungle.

Benny levered herself out. The doorway was pointing up about forty-five degrees. Her leg hurt, and she had a small cut above her left eye. The air was breathable, but smelt of fuel and thick jungle scents.

They'd crashed on the night side of the planet, and the only light was coming from the control pod. The ship had ended up pointing the way they'd come from. It had tumbled out of the atmosphere, hit the ground, then some vegetation, skipped up into the air, crashed back down, skipped up and down again, then rolled and crashed its way through a jungle. That had taken five minutes, and every second of that, Benny had worried they were going to go over a cliff or hit a rock that was bigger than they were.

The antigrav field had held until the very last moment, and had cushioned the worst of the impact. All three of the crew had been able to unstrap themselves from their seats and get up. There were no serious injuries.

Benny jumped down. She had two things to do: check the surroundings, then check the ship itself. It was too dark to see anything, so she switched on a torch. The ship was in the middle of a dense jungle; the trees here would probably have blocked out most of the light, had there been any sunlight to block. The ship had scored a line in the landscape miles long as it had rolled to a halt.

So... they were in a jungle. The leaves glinted in the torchlight, there were also lines of creepers. The night air was crisp, but certainly not cold. There were pools of water on the ground.

Benny turned her attention to the ship, running the beam of the torch over the hull. It had landed on its side, with the sensor pod crushed underneath. Crashing over and over, anything less than armour-plated on the hull had been squashed flat. So, they'd lost the mechanical arms, laser cannon and the antennae. The antigrav was in relatively good shape, though. There was only the one porthole, and that was intact. The emergency hatch was designed to be resealed, so that wouldn't be a problem. The main hatch wouldn't open, but it hadn't been breached, either.

Johannsen appeared at the hatchway, and Benny quickly apologised for blinding him with the torch beam.

'Could have been a lot worse,' she shouted up. 'It's warm, there's water.'

‘Flynn can’t get a radio signal,’ he called down.

‘The antennae have all been crushed.’

‘There’s an emergency one. Hasn’t that deployed?’

Benny swung the beam around. ‘What does it look like?’

‘It looks like an antenna.’

‘How long?’

‘Ten feet? It can extend further. It should be pointing straight up.’

‘I don’t think anything’s extended anywhere,’ she told him. ‘Ten feet might not be enough. I think the trees are about three times that. We’ve flattened a lot of jungle coming down – is there some way to detach the radio and get it to a clear spot?’

‘Standard procedure is to stay with the ship and await rescue.’

‘You didn’t detect any animal life here.’

‘When I did the scan, I assumed the detectors were working.’

Benny looked around, nervously. If there was anyone or anything down here, they’d certainly have seen the ship arrive. Everyone on this continent would have seen it.

‘What are you telling me, Johannsen?’

‘That we stay with the ship and await rescue.’

Benny climbed back up to the hatch, Johannsen helping her back inside.

‘We didn’t see anything on the way down,’ Benny reminded him. ‘There weren’t any cities, or roadways.’

‘We weren’t really concentrating on the landscape. I’ll see what was recorded in the ship’s computer.’

‘Can we re-launch?’

‘Standard proced –’

‘Can we launch if we have to?’

‘It needs some work, but we should be able to. The engine is intact, and so’s the hull. Obviously it’s easier to repair a ship on the ground than in orbit.’

‘Okay. The three of us need to prep the ship.’

‘Look, Benny, I’ll be honest with you. I’m an agency pilot. I’ve been flying for nearly ten years, I know my way around this class of ship. But I’ve never done this sort of thing before.’

‘Well, this isn’t the first crash I’ve been in,’ Benny told him. ‘We have to hope for the best and plan for the worst. The worst is that there are intelligent, hostile forces on this planet who know we are here.’

‘Are we going to be all right?’ she asked timidly.

Benny nodded. ‘This planet can support human life. We have rations for a long time, lots of water – with a plentiful supply on the planet. We’ve got basic survival gear.’

‘But no-one even knows the planet is here.’

‘Didn’t you log it with the authorities?’ Johannsen had asked.

‘I think I did. I don’t know. The ship’s computer said I sent the message, but there’s no way of knowing if it arrived. Look... if Benny’s right, we’d be mad to stay with the ship. We should set up camp close by.’

Johannsen was shaking his head before she’d finished. ‘This ship provides shelter. It’s also the first place a rescue mission will head. It’s secure. Even without the gray shielding, it’s a tough ship.’

‘Is the emergency beacon on?’ Benny asked.

Johannsen held up a small silver cube. ‘Only the captain can do that. Here we go.’

Benny took it from him, and activated it by twisting the top. ‘Will the transmission be able to get past the gravity waves, Flynn?’

‘It may have to take a long way round, but yes.’

‘Okay. We do what we can to fix the antigravs. Even if we can’t reach escape velocity, the antigravity shielding will give us better protection, and we should be able to get enough power to move around the planet’s surface.’

They set to work. Johannsen and Flynn could do the technical stuff, Benny concentrated on working her way round the ship and making an inventory of the equipment they had. She tapped away at a handheld computer, checking everything on the manifest to see what state it was in.

Gratifyingly little was broken. A couple of plates were smashed, a fair few screens and instrument panels had cosmetic damage. Mostly, these were just small cracks, but a few of the displays were affected. The most damage was in the sensor pod. These were delicate instruments, and just about everything had blown a fuse, reset itself or simply fallen apart. Benny would need Flynn to double check, but she doubted they had spares for everything here.

When she’d got her list, Benny went to the control deck, sat in Johannsen’s chair and dialled up the computer logs for the ship’s descent. It had taken eight minutes. Johannsen hadn’t been able to stop the ship hitting the planet, but he’d been able to alter the angle of descent to slow them down. They’d have been dead without that. The ship had been caught and overwhelmed in an unexpected wave, like a swimmer out at sea. Nothing could have got them out of it, and even a larger ship would have foundered.

Benny watched the displays. This was pretty much an Earth-standard planet – a little hotter than she was used to during the day, but the temperatures were equatorial, nothing to worry about. There were small oceans, but the planet was mainly landmass, with great mountain ranges and rift valleys dotted around vast plains. The jungle

seemed to cover about a quarter of the surface, and the ship had come to rest about a mile from its edge.

This was all her interpretation, from images of the surface compiled and collated as the ship smashed through the atmosphere towards it. There was very little sensor data.

She set the computer looking for signs of intelligent life, but it didn't have enough data to go on. Benny set about interpreting the photographs of the surface. As she'd thought, there were no lights, roads, built-up areas. Civilisations had been known to hide themselves away in vast subterranean or submarine cities, but they usually needed a good reason. There was no evidence of intelligent life here, either now or in the past.

Benny had been out in the galaxy long enough to know that she couldn't rule it out. She very much doubted that her time here would be spent sat comfortably in the ship, waiting for rescue.

After about an hour Johannsen came into the control pod.

'We've done all we can until daylight. Look... Flynn's feeling scared. With your permission, I'd like to take her to her quarters and look after her tonight.'

He was so gentlemanly about it that Benny had to laugh.

'It's okay, pilot, I know about the two of you.'

Johannsen blushed. 'Oh... right. It's okay?'

'Yes, it's okay. You don't need to ask permission.'

'I think technically I do. But... er, thanks.'

He disappeared off to his cabin.

Benny sat alone. She wasn't jealous, she realised. In fact it was quite liberating. She didn't need some hunky (or in Johannsen's case, semihunky) space pilot to look after her. When she was younger, Benny had tended to drink to obliterate her problems rather than jump into bed with someone. Flynn couldn't make the scary things go away, but she could forget about them for ten or twenty minutes, or whatever Johannsen could manage. Benny was happy to sit here looking out into the night. She wasn't even missing her alcohol.

Just as importantly, she didn't feel the need to be the shoulder to cry on. People looked to her in dangerous situations, and that was gratifying in its way, but also something of a bind. She had dependants, now.

Benny had what she came on holiday for: a sense of independence. The knowledge she could rely on herself and that, for ten minutes at least, no-one else was relying on her.

As events transpired, Benny had nearly twice that before that ceased to be the case.

It started innocuously enough, with a tiny clattering noise outside.

Benny didn't take too much notice. This was a surprisingly quiet jungle, and it was a real *nothing* type of noise: a branch blowing against another one, or some bit of stray debris falling off the ship's hull.

The second time it happened, Benny looked up out of the observation bubble. It was dark out there – there were the first hints of dawn, she thought. There was no sign of whatever had caused the noise. Benny returned to analysing the images of the planet's surface. Archaeologists were trained to examine aerial photographs, so this was second nature to her. So far, though, she couldn't see anything that hinted at habitation, past or present.

The pod shook a little.

Benny wondered what effect the gravity shockwaves would have on the planet. They generated enough force to shove the spaceship around, but affecting a whole world would need a completely different order of power. That had always been the contradiction about gravity – it bound the universe together, dictated the motions of the planets and stars and galaxies and even the clusters of galaxies... but at the same time, it was so weak the pull from a tiny magnet or an insect flapping its wings were able to break free from it.

It seemed likely, though, that the gravity waves would have some sort of effect. Unusual tides? Earthquakes?

Something ran out in front of the ship. It was gone in the time it took Benny to lift her head. It had been an animal movement. A quadruped darting across the trench scooped out by the crashing ship. It moved like a large dog or a fox, and was – she guessed – about the same size.

It wasn't really enough to disturb Johannsen and Flynn with, so she stood and went over to the observation bubble to get a better look. There was a scuttling on the top of the ship.

That sounded more like a bird, but Benny could see how it might have been a fox.

The hull of the ship was, as Johannsen had said, tough. It would be able to deflect a micrometeorite, a tiny stone flying through space with several times the force of a bullet. A fox wouldn't give it any trouble.

Then all the computers crashed, and it took a moment for the lights to flicker back on.

Benny frantically tried to restart the nearest console. The power was fine. The hardware was working, it must have been a software fault. She tried rebooting it, but it had gone into some sort of protective mode.

'How did it pick up a virus out here?' Benny asked.

In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a computer virus

was a simple piece of software that was very good at sending itself to other computers and which set them to do destructive or disruptive work. By Benny's time, computer viruses were infinitely more complex and adaptive than *real* viruses. The only way to fight them was to release ever more complex and adaptive antiviruses out into dataspace. It was an arms race, but for centuries it had been more of a Cold War – neither virus nor antivirus could make a move without almost instantaneous and utterly ruthless countermeasures being taken. It had been a very long time since this war had involved people at all: the software was infinitely better at programming itself than a human being could be. Kids were made to debate the ethics of the situation in school essays, and there was some debate whether the viruses were intelligent. They couldn't hold a conversation, yet they could out-calculate the greatest human mathematicians. So the jury was still out on that one.

The point being that viruses rarely did anything as crude as crash a ship's computer these days, even if the antiviruses let them.

It was time to assemble her crew. Benny hurried over to Johannsen's cabin door and knocked on it sharply.

'Something's happening,' she shouted through the door.

Johannsen opened the door, still zipping up his jumpsuit. Flynn was behind him, just starting to pull on hers.

'What's going on?'

'We've got animals outside.' Johannsen relaxed until Benny added 'And the moment they showed up, the computer crashed.'

'Coincidence?' Johannsen offered, smoothing out his jumpsuit. Benny doubted it, but couldn't explain how the two might be connected.

There was another skittering over the roof, then another to one side.

'Have you seen them?' Flynn asked.

Benny shook her head and moved back to the control pod. 'I glimpsed one.'

'I don't think they can harm us,' Johannsen reassured Flynn, or tried to.

'I think that's probably in the top three Famous Last Words,' Benny told them. 'I want you to get kitted up to evacuate – grab a survival kit and ration pack. I've got the emergency beacon.'

'We should stay with the ship,' Johannsen warned. 'Standard procedure –'

'We won't leave unless we have to,' Benny assured them. 'But if we have to, I want us to be ready to survive.'

'Do we have any weapons?' Flynn asked.

'No,' both Benny and Johannsen answered.

There was a rather worrying wrenching sound from the roof.

‘Er ..’ Benny said, leaving the subtext for her colleagues to interpret. They hurried to the hab pod, grabbed the survival gear and started filling bags with other essentials.

Johannsen checked his wrist computer. ‘We’re coming up for dawn’ Benny was looking around for anything that could scare off an animal. ‘A flaming torch,’ she said finally.

‘Are we abandoning ship?’ Flynn asked, as it lurched.

Johannsen looked over at Benny. ‘This ship weighs tons. A pack of dogs couldn’t push it over.’

Benny rather thought that depended on the size of the pack, but kept her mouth shut. They could hear a lot of activity now. Footsteps on the hull, but also crashing around in the vegetation. The ship lurched to the other side.

‘This is unusual animal behaviour,’ Benny told them.

‘You reckon?’ Flynn snapped, before apologising.

‘The two of you stay here and pack up. I’m going to take a look.’

Benny headed back to the control pod and peered out of the window. The first thing she noticed was that the window itself had become a little scratched, like the animals had clambered up (or down) it. The second was that the sun was beginning to peek over the horizon. At the moment it was just a hint of fire through the wall of trees, but the landscape around here was flat, and it shouldn’t be too long before there was proper daylight.

The third thing was a pair of red eyes that watched her from the vegetation. The animal was down low. What little Benny could see reinforced her idea that it was some sort of dog. The eyes were almost circular.

Then the eyes weren’t there any more, and she lost sight of the dog. That was strange. It wasn’t like eyes blinking, or the dog moved, it was like they’d just vanished.

There was a tearing noise behind her. She hurried back into the hab pod.

Flynn was staring at the gash in the bulkhead. Benny joined her in that. Johannsen was edging away.

Something had torn a line about an inch wide and ten inches long in the outside wall.

‘They’re tough critters, aren’t they?’ Benny said.

There was another tearing noise, this time from the engine room. That was followed by another from the same direction, then another.

‘They’re taking the ship apart,’ Johannsen said, his voice rather calm in the circumstances. Benny could only imagine that the pilot admired their ability.

‘Concentrating on the engine,’ Flynn added.

That was rather odd. 'Is the engine, er, is it hotter than the rest of the ship or something? I don't think it smells of anything, does it?'

Flynn and Johannsen shook their heads.

'I'm just trying to think why they're so interested in an antigrav engine. If they're after warmth or food, they'd come to the hab pod,' Benny mused aloud.

'Perhaps they're picking up a high-pitched sound?' Flynn wondered. It was a better theory than anything Benny could come up with.

Benny moved over to the control pod. 'There's no sign of the creatures this side. They really are only interested in the engine.'

'It gives us an escape route,' Johannsen said.

'I thought standard procedure -'

Johannsen was looking for a switch. 'You can blow the observation dome out.'

'Flynn, are you ready?' Benny asked, then motioned that Johannsen should open the door.

He pressed down a control, then confirmed it. The glass dome popped away. Johannsen was first out, followed by Flynn, followed by Benny. They ran out, into the night. Behind them, some of the creatures had got inside the engine pod.

'Er, right, the plan,' Benny said, acutely aware she was meant to be in charge. 'Essentially, I think we should run very fast away from the creatures. Any objections?'

'How do we know we're not running towards them?' Flynn asked, panting a little already.

'We don't,' Johannsen told her.

Benny considered the options. 'Well, we know there are at least some animals back the way we came. I don't think anything's following us.'

They stuck to the rut the ship had carved out when it landed. The mud was firm, and the surface was even enough to make for quite a good running track. The jungle looked dense, and there were far too many places for monsters to hide.

Benny risked a look back at the ship, which was now a few hundred yards away. The last of the dog things dropped into the engine compartment as she watched. There was no sign of any other animal activity.

She was developing a stitch, at least two or three minutes before a healthy woman her age should have done.

'Stop,' she told them.

There was enough light now to see that Flynn was red-faced and out of breath. Johannsen didn't seem too inconvenienced by his run.

'There,' Flynn managed, pointing to something at the side of the trench.

It was a cave or pothole, exposed by the impact from the ship. It would make a good shelter. Johannsen was pointing his wrist computer at it.

‘No life signs,’ he told them. It looked like a natural feature, not an animal burrow.

‘We’re too exposed,’ Benny told them.

‘What do you suggest we do?’

It was a good question. They needed shelter, but somewhere that they could defend from the creatures. Benny didn’t think she knew enough about the native life here. Could they climb? They could tear through metal.

Benny turned back the way they’d come.

‘Er... hate to be picky, but where’s our ship?’ she asked.

It had gone, along with all sign of the creatures. The three of them hurried back the way they had come. They reached the end of the trench, they could even see the depression the ship had formed when it came to rest. The ship wasn’t there.

‘They dragged it away,’ Flynn suggested.

Benny looked around, but the vegetation hadn’t been disturbed: The ship was the size of a small house,’ she reminded them. ‘How could they have moved it?’

‘They flew it?’ Johannsen offered.

Benny thought about it. ‘They repaired the ship and flew it off? In two minutes?’

‘More like five,’ Johannsen told her.

‘I think my point still stands.’

Benny looked around, feeling rather helpless. ‘Transmat?’ she said, finally.

The other two shrugged. It was possible to teleport a whole ship. But, for human technology at least, it would need a lot of power and some pretty specialised equipment. It was only a couple of hours since she’d activated the emergency beacon. There was just no way even the fastest rescue ship would have got here in that time.

She knelt in the dirt and started examining it.

‘What are you doing?’ Flynn asked.

‘Archaeology, I suppose,’ Benny replied. The one thing she knew how to do better than anything else was interpret patterns in the soil. The mud was dotted with footprints – her own, from her little expedition when they’d first landed, then the ones when they fled the ship, but mainly three-toed tracks from a pack of quadrupeds. The creatures had swarmed across the ship, and the tracks were a tangle, impossible for her to interpret. ‘I thought perhaps it had been pulled underground, or fallen through, but the soil’s not been disturbed.’

Her eye caught sight of something glinting. She plucked it out of the

soil.

It was a piece of bedding from the ship. There was no way it could have fallen out. Benny wondered how it had got here. It didn't seem very likely that the creatures would have been interested in it.

Flynn and Johannsen were just standing around. This annoyed Benny a little, but she admitted to herself that she couldn't think of anything they could be doing. She continued to search the soil. There were small pieces of crockery and paper everywhere. Fallen from the ship? In which case, where were the larger pieces she'd seen before that had come off as they landed? Where was all the metal?

Benny stood up and dusted herself off. She looked around.

'Not dragged,' she said aloud. 'Not lifted. Not flown. Not transmatted. Not buried. Not blown up. Not disintegrated. Not invisible.'

She glanced down again at the animal tracks. There were a lot of them, all the way around the ship. Leading towards, leading away, then a mass of prints around where the ship had been. Not just on the outline of the ship, but all around the area.

'Eaten,' she concluded.

That got Flynn and Johannsen's attention.

'You're kidding?'

But Benny wasn't. The more she looked at the evidence, the more it looked like the creatures had flocked round the ship like hyenas round a dead wildebeest.

Proof came when she found a small bit of ceiling plating that had been chewed.

The three of them passed the chunk of ceramic around, turned it over, examined it, tried to come up with another explanation.

'I'm right, though, aren't I?' Benny said finally.

The other two looked at each other, then back at Benny. They nodded.

'Well... at least the monsters don't seem to eat *people*,' Benny said lamely.

Big Fish

They weren't going to be short of water, fuel or food. Their survival packs alone would have been enough, but the planet was fertile. They quickly found a stream of what Johannsen's computer was happy to call fresh water, practically every plant had some sort of edible fruit or tuber. There were trees to make firewood, and enough dry leaves and things to help get a fire started.

There was no sign at all of the creatures. This wasn't for want of Benny and her crew looking. The animals were out there, and they could bite through metal. They were a concern, clearly. But, for the moment, they'd vanished.

So, there were worse planets to be marooned on.

Benny kept the emergency beacon close, tucked away so tightly that Flynn wondered if it might block the signal.

The three of them had agreed to make for safe ground before darkness fell again. Night was, they calculated, about seven hours away. What they couldn't agree on was what qualified as safe ground. A high vantage point could easily be surrounded, as could a cave.

They didn't know enough about the creatures to know how to defend against them. Animals on most planets would keep away from fire. But, then again, animals on most planets didn't include spacecraft in their diets.

It was agreed, though, that getting out of the jungle and to an area with fewer places for predators to lurk was a good idea.

Benny had a mystery to solve. There were small buzzing and droning insects. There were flocks of birds, and occasional rustles ahead of them in the undergrowth which suggested small animals scurrying out of their way. Benny wasn't a zoologist, but recognised a flourishing ecosystem when she saw one.

Life forms developed at least slightly differently on every planet. There were, it seemed, some evolutionary strategies that seemed to work on most planets. These weren't always big things. Most worlds indeed most asteroids and comets – had simple life: what tended to be called bacteria on Earth. Most Earth-type planets developed complex, interdependent systems of life. Plants were eaten by herbivores that were eaten by carnivores. Not every planet was like this, of course, but most of the planets which humans were interested in seemed to follow the same basic template. This wasn't some unchanging arrangement, though: just the opposite. Plants didn't want to be killed, and neither did herbivores. Both evolved new ways of surviving. And,

in turn, the carnivores developed new methods of attack. There wasn't a designer, but there was a set of objectives: the creation of a new generation, equipped to survive to create yet another generation. Each new development had a cost – big fangs or tough skin didn't just appear, and each change would have implications: it might mean an animal had to become heavier, which would mean it would have to eat more food.

The mystery, then, was why an animal would evolve that could eat spacecraft. Especially on a planet that wasn't even on the space lanes. It had evolved for a reason.

Benny was buggered if she could think of what that reason was, though.

'Hey!' Johannsen said, running away from the others.

Flynn started heading after him. Benny found herself following, against all her instincts. They'd been walking along a clear route, with good forward visibility. Now they were breaking cover.

'I saw something in the sky,' Johannsen explained.

Benny saw it too, now. A glint.

'It's very high up,' she told them. Tens of thousands of feet, at least.

'It's quite small,' Johannsen said. 'I think it's nearer than it looks.'

'Are you sure it's not just a bird?' Flynn asked.

It suddenly changed direction.

'It's an aircar,' Benny said. Although it wasn't leaving a trail or making a sound, like most aircars would, it was moving like one.

She stopped and got the others to do likewise.

'Find a way to signal to it,' she told them.

She and Flynn began digging around in their backpacks. Johannsen had taken binoculars from his belt.

'Don't just look at it, try to attract its attention,' Benny ordered.

'We don't know if they are hostile,' he replied.

Flynn practically pulled the binoculars out of his hand. 'We know we're surrounded by animals which are hostile.'

Johannsen was pulling the binoculars back, trying to look through them. 'We could be killed by them.'

The aircar had gone.

Benny stood up, furious. 'Well?'

Johannsen stepped back. 'What are you looking at me like that for?'

Did you see it?' Flynn asked, still anxiously scanning the sky.

'No'

'So we didn't see it, and they didn't see us?' Benny was trying very hard not to hit the pilot.

'And neither of you managed to signal to them, either,' he reminded them. 'Your emergency beacon is on. It's broadcasting in enough ways

that they should have been able to pick up the signal'

'They are probably travellers, not natives,' Benny added. 'There's no evidence of civilisation on this planet. Okay. Well, we're no worse off than we were ten minutes ago, and we should press on. We at least know we're not alone. Let's come up with a way to send a message to anyone who flies past, though. They might even be looking for us already.'

She glanced up at the empty blue sky.

Benny was the first to remark that the emergency rations weren't very nice to eat. Her exact expression was a little more colourful. They weren't starving – or even that hungry, yet – but the group's thoughts turned to how they might vary their diet.

They were in grassland, now. It stretched, almost unbroken, to the horizon. It moved like the sea – wind forming the grass into waves. Benny watched the whole scene, and saw what looked for all the world like tides and cross-currents. There was something soothing in the vastness, the quiet ocean of green.

The leaves and the grasses, though, offered very little in the way of taste or nutrition. There were smaller plants nestled in there, and their roots were chewy and a little nutty. It wasn't much, though. There was, from the sound of it, a lot of insect life around, but they saw very little of it, and what they saw was impossible to catch, and would hardly make a meal.

They found a fast-flowing stream. The water was cool and very refreshing. Flynn and Johannsen viewed Benny's reluctance to go too near the water with amusement, and quietly ignored her warnings that the water could be colder and deeper than it looked. The day was getting to be hot, and all three of them were soon soaking their feet in the water.

A flock of brightly coloured birds flew past, heading in the same direction as the water. There was an odd clacking noise as they went by. They looked to be the same size as geese, but it was difficult to judge.

'How would we go about catching one of those?' Benny asked.

Johannsen shrugged. Flynn mumbled something about how easy it would be if they had a gun.

Benny had the sinking feeling that they weren't cut out to be hunter-gatherers.

'Fishing!' she said suddenly. She'd seen people fish before, and it didn't look that difficult.

The other two looked at her.

'Catching fish?' she elaborated.

This rang a bell for Flynn. 'I've seen that on the datanet,' she

announced.

'Everyone fishes,' Benny complained. 'It's one of the universal constants for inhabited planets.'

'There's nothing but algae in the oceans of Petuaria,' Johannsen told her. 'No fish to be had.'

'You could teach us,' Flynn suggested brightly.

Benny hesitated. 'Well, when I say "everyone" fishes, it's more a case of every society, rather than every individual.'

'You've never caught a fish in your life, have you?' Johannsen asked.

'Or even tried?'

'No... but I've, er, seen it on the datanet. I've had friends who fish. Wait, better than that: I've seen it done.'

Two hours later, they had a plan to catch a fish, and it worked.

They would use one of the backpacks as a sort of lobster pot, piling stones so that anything in the water had to head that way. Ten minutes after they'd laid the trap, and sat a little way back so as not to alert anything in the stream, they'd caught something. Benny and Johannsen tugged the backpack out, surprised by the weight.

It was a robot... although something so fine and beautiful deserved a less functional name. It was about two feet long, made from what looked like segments of silver, with carefully engraved scales. The eyes were tiny fixed camera lenses. The mouth was an intricate mechanism. The fish flopped and flipped about the bank, its little electric motors whirring futilely.

'A robot fish?' Benny asked.

'Some sort of spy drone?' Johannsen wondered aloud.

'Spying on what? Real fish?'

It was a piece of workmanship, the sort of thing that looked too valuable to be out here, swimming around unguarded. It should have been in a museum. It reminded Benny of Tibetan or Indian metal idols. There was something solid and sacred in its construction. In Earth terms, though, it was difficult to put in context. It wasn't a toy, it wasn't a functional piece of hardware. The only place it would fit would be as the possession of a Chinese emperor, an automaton like a clockwork bird or mechanical dancing monkey.

'If I had a tool kit, I could open it up,' Flynn said.

It seemed a sacrilegious idea to Benny, but she said nothing.

'It's dying ..' Johannsen said.

Benny was about to point out that it was out of water, it was bound to die, but stopped herself. Robots don't die.

'It has gills,' she said, pointing them out. More like heating valves, they were labouring to open and shut.

They watched the fish expire there on the river bank.

‘A robot that only functions in water?’ Johannsen asked.

Benny needed a moment. The fish dying had upset her a little. She stepped back from the group.

Her bare foot caught on something sharp and metal.

She pulled away from it, and swore.

Flynn and Johannsen were there in moments. Flynn examined the foot, found that it was bleeding. She sterilised the wound and dressed it. A quick scan from Johannsen’s wrist computer reassured them that Benny hadn’t caught anything from the jab.

Johannsen found what she’d stepped on.

He held it up. A metal insect like a dragonfly. As Benny turned it over in her hand, she was certain it had been built by the same people as the fish. The wings were delicate solar panels, the body made from segments of copper.

‘It must have cost a fortune,’ Johannsen said.

‘What was it doing on the ground?’

Benny was examining the insect. ‘I think it was already dead. It’s been sliced at’

She shook the creature, to see if anything came out of the holes in its sides. It seemed to be hollow, and nothing even rattled.

‘I think someone’s stripped out all the circuits and gears,’ she concluded. ‘This is just a shell’

Flynn took her turn examining it. ‘You’d think the shell would be valuable’

‘That would depend on which materials were rare here. There could be a lot of whatever this is’

‘Copper,’ Johannsen told them, checking it with his computer.

‘Even so... why go to all the trouble of breaking it open here, then throwing away the body?’

‘Perhaps it was washed up in the river,’ Benny suggested.

The others bowed to her archaeological insight, but Benny hadn’t convinced herself.

‘Robot insects and fish,’ Benny mused aloud. She remembered the sound of the birds passing overhead. The clacking noise.

She stood up, started looking around. ‘And birds,’ she finished.

Johannsen was back at the fish. ‘If we could break it open, we could find out who made the components. We might even find serial numbers, things like that.’

He had a rock in his hand.

‘No,’ Benny said.

He hesitated. ‘We need to know.’

Benny shook her head. ‘We don’t. Not yet. Whatever else that robot is, even if silver is common here, it’s carefully built. It’s a high status

object. We shouldn't smash it.'

'We've already killed it,' Johannsen pointed out.

'We should wait until we have the right tools,' Flynn said. 'We can do a proper analysis.'

They continued on. Two or three hours before nightfall, they'd spotted more flocks of birds. Using the binoculars, they'd confirmed that they were also mechanical. Benny would have loved to have caught one. Johannsen and Flynn both marvelled that something made of metal could fly by flapping its wings – whoever had designed it had solved a number of engineering problems. They could, of course, only assume it was metal by looking at it, and it may have been some sort of more lightweight material, like plastic.

Benny had the robot fish in her backpack. Being metal, it weighed as much as everything else in there combined. It shifted around as she walked, and by now Benny had mild backache.

There was an outcrop of rocks up ahead, with at least a mile of grass in every direction. A good vantage point, a good place to go to draw attention to themselves if another aircar passed overhead. As they waded through the knee-high grass, tiny robot mice scattered away from them, only to converge back where they'd passed.

'The animals here might have all died,' Benny conjectured. 'So the people built replacements.'

Flynn shrugged. 'Has that sort of thing ever happened before?'

'Oh, this is a big galaxy. Everything's happened somewhere at some time.'

'None of the species are replicas of Earth species,' Flynn pointed out. 'Not exactly replicas. Sure, there are things that look like fish and birds and mice – but that doesn't make them fish, birds or mice.'

'You've lost me,' Johannsen admitted.

'She's right,' Benny said. 'It's a question of function. One way of swimming through water is always going to be to build something fishlike.'

'Because they're aerodynamic?'

'Hydrodynamic,' Benny corrected him.

'It doesn't mean the same thing,' Flynn butted in.

'It does. It means aerodynamic except in water, not air.'

'It really doesn't.'

As the nearest English dictionary was ten light years away, they agreed to differ. Benny further suggested that they didn't play Scrabble that evening.

Johannsen coughed. 'You were explaining something.'

'Oh right. Okay: on Earth, dolphins look like ichthyosaurs did, even though one was a mammal, one was a reptile and they lived millions

of years apart. There are also fish that look almost the same, and marine birds like penguins evolve the same sort of body shape.'

'Because they're all solving the same problem?'

'Exactly. And that's exactly the problem the designer of the robot had to solve.'

Benny wasn't happy with her answer. There was something nagging at her. It would wait, though: they'd reached the outcrop.

There looked like a good flat area about thirty feet up. It involved some climbing, but the rock had enough crannies and lumps to serve as hand and footholds. Benny went first, leaving her backpack behind for the moment.

Fifteen feet up from the ground was a large, flat space. It was roughly circular, and about fifteen feet in diameter. There was a small hollow in the rock wall, a cave big enough for the three of them to sleep in. The rock loomed up another thirty or forty feet into a rough pillar.

The cave would make for good shelter. Benny turned back, ready to help Johannsen and Flynn get up.

Behind her, there was a sound like a cutlery drawer opening.

Benny froze. Behind her, a couple of simultaneous soft hisses and a series of subtle whirrs, little electric motor noises, like the central locking of a car, or the opening of a CD player.

She turned to face it.

It turned to face her.

It had been in the cave. It had red eyes, lit from behind. They were dilating like old camera lenses, adjusting focus to get a good look at her. Its wolf face was a silver mask, angular and beautiful, fur-like texture engraved on it. The ears were directional aerals. The teeth were metal spikes of varying, irregular lengths. As she watched, Benny realised it could retract and extend them into what looked rubber gums.

It was the size of a large wolf or a small lion, with a hunched-up back. Its body was a set of interlocking stainless steel bands, its hips were corrugated plastic pipes. All four legs were elegant arcs of metal and hydraulic cabling, with intricate joints. All four feet ended with knife blades. These clacked against the rock as it flexed itself.

Behind it, in the cave mouth, half a dozen pairs of red lights flickered on, half a dozen heads twisted in their shoulder-mountings. All seven of the creatures took a step forward.

5

Wolf Time

The robot wolves watched her carefully. Benny could literally hear their minds working overtime – a chorus of chirping and twittering that sounded for all the world like ancient computer hard drives processing something.

Were they communicating with each other, she wondered?

Apparently not. But all seven seemed to be running the same program. They were sniffing the air, now, extending their claws and fangs, reconfiguring themselves to attack.

They hadn't pounced yet. Benny represented something new, something of a risk.

Not something entirely new. These were the creatures that had attacked their ship, and taken it apart. Perhaps not this exact pack, but ones of the same species.

Not species: *design*, she corrected herself.

'What's the problem?' Johannsen asked, hoisting himself up onto the plateau.

The creatures leapt at him, one after the other, expertly avoiding Benny, who didn't even have time to turn her head before they were on him.

The first thing she saw when she managed that was Johannsen's head falling away from his body, which dropped over the edge of the outcrop. The wolves kept the corpse upright, tugging at the wrists, waist and ankles. A moment later, they let the body drop back over the edge.

Flynn was screaming by this point.

As one, the seven wolves turned their heads to the new sound, scurried to the edge to get a look.

Benny knew that she had to act, but that if she did even very slightly the wrong thing then both she and Flynn would be dead.

Something was bothering her – one thought that was jumping up and down in her brain demanding attention: the robots had let Johannsen's body drop. They'd killed their prey, but now weren't interested in it.

'Benny, are you there?' Flynn wailed.

'I am. Sit tight,' Benny told her.

The robots flexed and twitched, remained poised to attack.

'They've killed –'

'I know.'

It was like the wolves could hear or smell something, but weren't

too sure what it was.

Whatever else robots were, their behaviour made sense. All robots followed a set of rules, even if one of those rules was 'in some circumstances, improvise or do the unexpected'.

If these had been real wolves or lions, she and Flynn would be safe. The predators would be feeding, now. On every planet, hunting animal prey required a lot of effort. And so it was done sparingly, it was opportunistic. Lions didn't kill for fun, or kill more than they needed to eat. So these robots weren't programmed to act exactly like carnivores in the wild.

And if these were some sort of killer guard robots, then they'd have followed their programming and killed all three of them. Unless they were programmed to just kill men and leave the women alive. In which case, she and Flynn were perfectly safe.

Benny didn't feel safe. She didn't want to bet her life that she was face-to-face with sexist robots.

Why would a robot eat meat, anyway? Animals ate meat, ultimately, because they themselves were made of meat. By definition, meat contained the things that would build and maintain muscle, fat and bone. Offhand, Benny couldn't see what a human body had in it that could be used to build a robot. A bit of iron, traces of other minerals. If they really wanted to feed like carnivores, they should be eating –

'Flynn,' Benny said. 'Throw away anything you're wearing or carrying that's metal, plastic or electronic. They're after that, not you. Anything artificial.'

Benny was divesting herself. She didn't wear much jewellery, but it all went. She slipped off the backpack, and put it to one side. She wasn't wearing a watch. Her shoes had metal eyelets for the laces. She slipped them off. Her flightsuit was fireproof artificial material – some sort of plastic, with metal zippers and other fastenings. She took it off.

'Johannsen wasn't made of metal.'

'No. But they attacked his wrist computer, his belt, the neck chain he wore. Not him.'

Benny stood in cotton socks and a two piece cotton/silk undergarment that had come with the flightsuit. She looked over to the backpack, started wondering what she could salvage.

'Everything,' Benny warned Flynn. 'Don't forget earrings or any other piercings you've got. If you're wearing an underwired bra, lose it.'

'But I'll be –'

'They'll kill you otherwise.'

The food rations were in foil packs. The water was in plastic flasks. A couple of the wolves had turned back to look at Benny. A couple

trotted towards her, unconcerned.

Benny knelt by her backpack, unzipped it.

The sound made the two wolves prick up their antennae. It was the grind of metal against metal, after all. Benny slipped her hand into the bag, pulled out a couple of the food packs. She threw them as far as she could, which turned out to be about ten feet.

The two wolves leapt over her and almost managed to catch the tiny silver packs before they landed. They began wrenching them apart, sometimes fighting over the same pack, sometimes content to take one each. But they were leaving the food itself, and just taking the packaging.

The other five were listening intently to Flynn. Something jangled against a rock – a discarded ring, perhaps, or coins.

Benny quickly rummaged through the bag, trying to retrieve anything that might be of use. This seemed to consist of the paperback novel, a small towel and the bikini, as well as a few smaller items. She'd been carrying that heavy metal fish around for hours for nothing. She'd have to leave it behind.

The emergency beacon sat at the bottom of the bag.

Damn.

She couldn't leave it. Without it, they were stuck on the planet with no way of contacting anyone. But it was a metal cube, full of juicy electronics. It would be like carrying a steak dinner around. She wrapped it up carefully in the towel, hoping this would mask its scent, or whatever it was that would let the robots sense it.

'How are you getting on, Flynn?'

'I'm done. Now what?'

'You're barefoot?'

'In socks.'

'Me too.'

The wolves had finished with the ration packs. Their colleagues were sniffing over the edge.

'Where are you? Can you throw the bag one way, then run in the other?'

'I think so. That's the plan, is it? Run?'

She sounded terrified. Benny couldn't blame her – she had just seen the man she'd been sharing a bed with for the last week (and who she may even have liked) die in front of her.

'That's the plan,' Benny said.

'Okay. Tell me when.'

Benny gave the signal, then threw her bag right into the five wolves on the cliff edge. They swarmed over it, clashed into each other as they raced to tear it apart. The contents were sprayed up into the air.

Benny didn't see it, she was already on the other side of the rocks,

climbing back down to the ground.

Flynn was waiting for Benny, her hands clasped over her bare chest. 'Here,' Benny said, handing Flynn her bikini top, and the two of them started walking briskly away from the rocks.

'It's a little small,' Flynn complained, before looking apologetic. 'I mean: thanks.'

As she struggled into the bikini top, Benny looked back. The robot wolves were content to feed. It must have been a rare feast for them.

'Can you fly a ship?' Flynn asked.

'Not unless a lot of the work has already been done for me.'

'Without a pilot, we're trapped.'

'A pilot is no use without a ship,' Benny said.

Flynn reddened. 'Don't say that. He could have helped us.'

'I didn't mean...'

'You're not even upset, are you?'

Benny wasn't. Not really. She hadn't had much of a chance to know Johannsen, she hadn't really warmed to him. It wasn't that she disliked him – and, of course, she didn't think he deserved to die, especially like that. But any emotional reaction she had was a fairly generic one. An off-the-shelf sense of shock and loss, rather than bespoke feeling. The strongest emotion she felt was guilt that she wasn't more sad.

'I know he meant a lot to you,' she told Flynn, aware how empty the words must have seemed.

Flynn was unimpressed, but let it go. 'Now what?' she asked. 'Now, we're probably safe.'

'Probably?'

Benny explained her theory about the robots only eating metals and plastics, then that she still had the emergency beacon. Flynn agreed that she was right not to let the wolves have it – but that having it meant they were vulnerable. She also pointed out that they didn't have anywhere to stay the night.

Benny tended to agree that they hadn't handled this perfectly. 'Perhaps we should try and make a signal for the aircar to spot. So it knows we're down here,' she said.

'We only saw one,' Flynn reminded her. 'What if it wasn't a car, but some sort of bird robot?'

'That's occurred to me,' Benny admitted, 'but we can't assume it wasn't what it looked like. It looked just like an aircar. These robots aren't based on Earth species, but the ones we've seen so far are all closely analogous to terrestrial animals. No animal on any colonised world flies the way an aircar does. It must have been doing hundreds of miles an hour. There's intelligent life on the planet.'

'So we start a fire?'

‘Yes, and one that spells out something, or at least has a regular shape. It can’t look like a natural blaze.’

‘I saved my matches,’ Flynn revealed.

‘Good work. I don’t know about you, but I’m getting cold.’

Night had fallen. They’d made camp, and lit a set of small fires, arranged like a cross, or the five on a die. They’d been walking all day, then there had been the adrenaline rush of Johannsen’s death and the escape from the predators. Now, both of them were coming down, and getting tired. It was cold, and would have been even if they’d still got their flight suits on. Flynn had become withdrawn, and had sat on the opposite side of the central fire from Benny. She’d resisted any attempt to start a conversation.

Benny felt calm, and had no idea why. A moment’s rational thought, and she should have been scared witless.

The fires bathed the immediate area in comforting red light, made the rest of the universe a black void. Flynn was asleep now, and Benny had little else to do but read her book, periodically shifting around to keep from getting too cold.

Benny had never read the novel before, and wasn’t really concentrating on it, now.

The planet was a quiet one – the robots weren’t calling out to each other, or screaming when they fought. There was the occasional sound as an animal went past – tinkling scurries from the rodents, solid clanks as a larger creature came close to the perimeter of the firelight. There was a breeze, making the grass rustle. But, on the whole, it was a bit like a school camping trip, complete with the pyjamas.

After an hour or so, when Benny was up to page thirty, that changed.

She glanced up, and saw a pair of red lights out in the darkness. ‘Flynn...’ she warned.

The girl stirred.

‘Wolf,’ Benny whispered.

Flynn couldn’t have been asleep. She was upright, now, staring into the dark.

‘I don’t see it.’

Now Benny couldn’t see it, either.

‘It can sense the emergency beacon.’

‘We can’t leave it behind.’

Benny stood, clutching the towel containing the emergency beacon in her hands.

And then the wolf took Benny down.

It was heavy. Of course it was heavy. It was metal. It was on her, each of its legs finding one of her limbs and putting it in a vice. She

was slammed to the ground like she'd been run over by a car. She screamed.

The creature looked down at her.

The red eyes scrutinised her like an airport security check. The silver metal body was glowing red in the firelight.

Flynn was running towards them, waving a burning piece of wood from one of the fires. 'Get back,' she warned.

The wolf didn't even flinch.

Benny couldn't move. She felt like she was sinking into the ground under the weight of this creature. It wasn't wasting energy, just standing on her, pinning her, cutting off the blood supply to her hands and feet.

She could lift her head. She could just about wriggle her hips. Flynn whacked the wolf with the lump of wood in her hand. It dented the side, slightly, but broke neatly in half.

'What do I do?' Flynn asked.

'Stand back, woman!' a voice said in the distance.

Flynn ducked.

There was a *ping*, and the robot wolf collapsed, releasing its grip on Benny, who rolled out of the way as it crashed to the ground, its eyes dark pits with no life in them.

Two men emerged from the gloom. They were wearing variations of the same clothing – lightweight trousers, boots and a chunky jacket with dozens of pouches and pockets. They were carrying long hunting rifles, ones with absurdly large scopes and other attachments, and just in case those weren't enough, they also had pistols on their belts. One of the men was in his sixties, the other was Benny's age. The older one wore a hat, the younger one a military-style beret. They looked more like mercenaries than soldiers.

Benny stood, rubbing one of her numb hands with the other. She hadn't been cut. Flynn was looking dazed.

The older man went straight past them and over to the fallen wolf.

He began examining it. The other man was looking at Benny and Flynn in a way that made it clear they were the first two females he'd seen for quite a long time. Benny began to worry that she'd been safer with the wolves.

Then he asked politely, 'Aren't you cold?'

'Freezing,' Flynn admitted.

He was already unbuttoning his jacket for her.

'This was good shooting,' the older man said. 'Severed the servo cables, didn't damage the head.'

Benny stepped forwards. 'Our ship crashed.'

The older hunter looked up. 'Where?'

Benny looked around, realised she had no idea. 'Um... in the jungle.'

A day's walk from here.'

'You've been here a day?' he asked.

The younger one looked worried. 'They took everything?'

'Yes.'

'What type of ship?'

'An explorer. Three man.'

'Three?'

'We lost our pilot,' Flynn said, huddled in her new jacket. She didn't seem at all wary.

'Was the ship armed?'

'No.'

'Not at all?'

'It had one laser cannon.'

'Then it was armed.'

'The gun didn't survive the crash.'

'That doesn't matter. Did you have sidearms?'

'No.'

'That's something.'

'If we'd had guns, our pilot would still be alive. We'd have been able to defend the ship.'

The older of the two men smiled. 'No.'

'You have guns, and you managed to defend yourself,' Benny noted.

'And how did you get here, if it wasn't by spacecraft?'

The old man looked her in the eye. 'You're not in a position to ask questions, are you?'

'Aren't I?' Benny asked. 'Why not? Since when? Who died and made you boss?'

'That supposed to be clever?'

'Didn't your mother tell you never to answer a question with a question?'

'Stop it,' Flynn insisted. She was looking at the younger man, now. 'Thank you for saving us.'

'We'll take you back to our camp. First, we'll put these fires out. And we'll find and bury your colleague.'

'Before we agree to that,' Benny said, 'you have to tell us who you are, and whether you think we're your prisoners. Until then, we're not saying anything or going anywhere.'

Flynn snorted. 'Speak for yourself. My name is Noele Flynn, I'm from Petuaria, and I'd love to see your base.'

'I'm Bellamy, this is Beardmore,' the young man said. 'You're not our prisoners, but if you want our help, you have to cooperate with us.'

'They rescued us,' Flynn reminded Benny.

Benny laughed. 'Yes. A lucky coincidence them turning up the exact

moment that wolf attacked us, wasn't it? How long were you watching us? Beardmore? Bellamy?'

Beardmore turned to Benny. 'And you are?'

'Professor Bernice Summerfield from... well, that's a long story.'

'Professor of what? Cybernetics?'

'Archaeology.'

The young man laughed. 'Wow. You really are on the wrong planet.'

'You've conducted a geophysical survey? You've taken aerial photographs? You've dug test pits and exploratory trenches?' He shook his head.

'Then, with the greatest respect, you're not qualified to tell me what sort of planet this is, archaeologically speaking.'

'Keep your shirt on... whoops, too late for that.' The old man was pointing a remote control up to the sky. A moment later, there was a faint hum. Benny could just make out an oblong patch of sky that was darker than the rest. A rope ladder dropped down.

'Our transport,' the old man said. 'After you...'

Flynn clambered up the ladder while the two men watched. Bellamy followed. Beardmore indicated the ladder.

'Only if you want to,' he told Benny.

Benny climbed up.

Benny wasn't an expert on aircars, but this was a product of some human corporation. She knew the hunters were human beings, but this was confirmation they weren't from some lost colony, but from mainstream galactic society. The displays were in English. It was a modern vehicle, certainly no more than a couple of years old. It was built for practicality, rather than luxury, though. The only light came from the displays.

There was a third man here, younger still, in the same sort of quasi-military quasi-uniform, but without the jacket. He introduced himself as Franks, helped them on board, then helped the men to stow their guns and the body of the wolf in a rear storage compartment. The hunters didn't let Flynn or Benny watch them as they did this.

Flynn sat next to Benny. 'Who are they?' she asked.

Benny admitted she hadn't a clue. 'You don't recognise the accent?'

'They aren't from this sector,' Flynn whispered. 'But if they were going to kill us, they could have done that already.'

Benny sighed. 'That doesn't follow at all.'

The men returned from their task. Franks took details from Benny, and referred to a detailed digital map. It wasn't hard to find the outcrop where Johannsen had died.

It was a couple of minutes' flight. Beardmore and Benny recovered the body, while Bellamy and Flynn dug a grave with wooden spades.

Franks stayed in the vehicle. The wolves weren't here. It hadn't struck Benny that the hunters were interested in coming here to get closer to more of the predators rather than to bury the prey.

They duly buried Johannsen all the same, though. They invited Flynn to give a blessing from her and Johannsen's world, rather than offering one of their own. Flynn was crying. Benny found she was upset for the girl. The hunters stood impassively.

The four of them returned to the aircar, and it powered away.

'How long before we reach your base?' Benny asked.

'A couple of days.'

'Days?' Flynn exclaimed. 'How far away is it?'

'It's close enough. But we're here for a reason.'

'You're hunters,' Benny said. 'You were already tracking the wolf that you shot, when you found us.'

Beardmore laughed. 'Not quite.'

'I see... Hunt the prey, hunt the predator,' Benny said.

He nodded.

Flynn was shaking her head. 'What are you talking about?'

'They were watching us, Flynn. Sitting a hundred yards away, watching us through sniper scopes. Waiting for something to attack. So... how long were you out there spying on us?'

'That would be telling, wouldn't it?' Beardmore said.

'But the animals are robots,' Flynn complained. 'They aren't even real animals.'

Benny watched the three hunters carefully as she asked the next question. 'Did you release the animals in the first place?'

Beardmore shook his head. 'No. They were here when we arrived.' If he'd said 'yes', of course, he'd have been as good as admitting they'd murdered Johannsen.

'You just happened to turn up here dressed as big game hunters and armed with elephant rifles? Quite a coincidence.'

'At least we bothered to get dressed,' Bellamy shot back, making the other two laugh. Benny could see Flynn squirming a little. Benny's bikini top really wasn't doing much of a job on her. Benny wasn't too worried – even if it was too much of a stretch to say that these were men with honourable intentions, and they were a long way from the nearest law and order. These men could do what they wanted to them, and then bury the evidence. But whoever they were, the hunters didn't seem interested in harming them.

'You came here to hunt the robots?'

Bellamy and the others were facing ahead.

'Which means you knew they were here. Which is interesting in and of itself, because this planet isn't registered with the authorities.'

Just before dawn, the hunters' aircar arrived on a high mountain plateau. There were two aircars here already. As Benny and Flynn got out, they counted eleven more hunters, all in variations of the same lightweight clothing, carrying various guns.

There was a base camp here, three small tents and a larger one in the centre. One hunter was on guard duty at what looked like a small air traffic control radar. This wasn't their main base, Bellamy told them, just a rendezvous point.

A shot rang out. Benny turned, and saw two of the hunters on the edge of the plateau, aiming their rifles into the air.

'Looking to bag some birds,' Bellamy explained. 'You can have a go later, if you want. Probably best if you wait for daybreak.'

He went over to the man sitting at the control desk. This was a thin, pale young chap, who looked Benny and Flynn up and down with some interest. He was wearing darker clothing than the others, and didn't seem quite so... rugged. An administrator, then, not a hunter.

'I caught a wolf and these two, Makins' Beardmore said. 'Wolf's stowed in the vehicle.'

Makins looked a little annoyed. 'By "wolf", I suppose you mean a Class IV Carnivore. There are other types out there, you do realise that?'

'These are fun to track, though.'

'Have you checked these two?'

'Checked them for what?'

Makins sighed, and took out a portable scanner from his pocket. He ran it down Benny, then turned and did the same to Flynn. 'Human,' he concluded.

Flynn was looking over at Benny in a way that confused her. Then Benny remembered the conversation of Flynn and Johannsen's back on the ship. This was the first proof for Flynn that Benny was flesh and blood.

'As opposed to what?' Bellamy said.

'We've not catalogued all the robots,' Makins said blandly. He looked Benny up and down. 'Do you know where they came from?'

Benny smiled politely. 'I'm capable of answering my own questions. We were on a survey mission out of Petuaria, when our ship was caught in the gravity waves and crashed here. The ship was destroyed, the pilot was killed.'

Makins nodded, without expressing a note of regret.

'If you could contact Petuaria, notify them of Johannsen's death and request a rescue mission...'

'In due course,' Makins replied, his attention returned to his screen. He tapped in a couple of commands. 'There is spare clothing and provisions. You may want to wash and eat, the next sortie is

scheduled to last three days.'

'Sortie?' Benny asked.

Makins looked up at her. 'The hunt,' he explained patiently. 'You'll pay for your board and lodging by helping out.'

'We're not hunters,' Flynn objected.

'Evidently. But you can help as a bearer, and you survived for a day out there, which suggests at least some initiative.'

'Benny's an archaeologist, my field is more space detection.'

'Both disciplines that require keen observation skills and a quick mind.' He paused. 'Benny is short for Bernice? So does that make you Professor Bernice Summerfield, the eminent archaeologist?'

'Difficult to believe, isn't it?' Flynn chipped in.

Makins stood, and shook her hand. Then noticed, apparently for the first time, that she was wearing only a flimsy cotton ensemble. 'A little off the beaten track for you, Professor?'

'I didn't realise that it would be quite so crowded when I got here.'

Benny realised that his disinterest had become reticence now he knew who she was. She was being equally coy, of course – she could have dropped Wolvencroft's name, explained about looking for the space probe.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Two years ago, the Bantu Corporation lost a megafreighter in this sector. It was the size of a city and carrying a great many robots. Six months ago, the Corporation traced it here.'

'The ship had been caught in the gravity shockwaves and crashed on the planet?'

'Indeed. Then the robots somehow activated themselves and escaped. The ship was a large robot factory, nearing the end of its journey. It would have had a full hold. The ship's manifest is missing, so we don't know how many robots there are out there.'

'Hang on. You're saying that there was a giant ship full of... robot wolves and fish?'

'I'm not responsible for the demands of a galactic capitalist market, Professor.'

'But –'

'The hunt leaves in an hour,' Makins interrupted. He turned away, and the discussion was over.

Benny showered behind a makeshift canvas screen propped up against a rock wall. The shower unit was basic stuff, simply a water tank and heater, a pipe and a recycling tray. The soap was an unscented block which was comfortably on the industrial side of the detergent market.

Around her, the hunters were bustling around, getting ready to move out. Benny felt self-conscious, but not uncomfortable. She and

Flynn were the only women, and there was a distinct whiff of testosterone as the various alpha male types went about their business. Benny didn't know how long the hunters had been on the planet, but it was at least weeks. She was aware that the arrival of any two people might disrupt the status quo, and that would only be made worse by them being women.

'Benny, are you there?'

It was Flynn.

'Nearly done,' Benny assured her.

'It's not that.'

'Are you okay?'

'I'm scared.'

'Look, I'll be out in a minute. We'll talk.'

'You do this all the time, don't you? Go on adventures? Face death? Well, I don't.'

'Winston Churchill once said that there's nothing more exhilarating than being shot at and surviving.'

'Is he one of the hunters?'

Benny hesitated. 'No,' she said, finally.

'I've not been shot at, yet,' Flynn said. 'The hunters have been quite good to us, I think. Even if their clothes don't fit.'

Benny looked down at the clothes she'd been given. She was tall, so that part was all right – but they would be ridiculously baggy on her. Flynn was shorter and rounder, and Benny couldn't imagine many men's clothes fitting her successfully.

'But I think I'm going to die.'

'The chances of that went down a lot when we met these people.'

'We don't know anything about them.'

Benny raised an eyebrow. 'We know all we need to know at the moment. They're big game hunters.'

'Do they even still have those?'

Benny sighed. 'Oh yes. There are plenty of colonies out there, and plenty of indigenous life forms getting in the way of human building efforts.'

'Guns for hire?'

'Yes. Although we don't know who's hiring this lot.'

Ten minutes later, Benny was clean, dry and dressed. She was nibbling at a biscuit as she went over to the two hunters practising their shots. 'Mind if I have a go?'

One of them tossed over his rifle. It was heavy and ungainly, but Benny caught it.

'Why don't you use energy weapons?' she asked. 'Bullets are a bit old-fashioned, aren't they?'

‘It’s why we’re practising,’ one of the hunters admitted. ‘With a laser beam, you don’t have to compensate for wind direction. Your shot hits at the speed of light.’

‘Point and click,’ the other one said.

Benny hefted the rifle, took a look through the scope.

‘This is a manual scope,’ she said. She wasn’t an expert on these things, but she knew that they usually had a computer-enhanced display. This was more like an old microscope – a dozen tiny dials and wheels to adjust.

She reached for the nearest. The hunter who’d given it to her held up his hand.

‘Don’t... it took me hours to set it up,’ he told her.

Benny returned to her firing position. Now it was there, the gun felt balanced, elegant, even though it was set up for someone else. She pivoted, scanning the sky for a target.

‘We can launch a clay pigeon,’ she was told. She nodded.

She located it, tracked its arc, squeezed the trigger and winged it. The two hunters were smiling when she lowered the rifle. ‘Beginner’s luck,’ she assured them. She tossed the rifle back to its owner, and went to look for Flynn.

Flynn was sat by one of the aircars, studying a handheld computer. ‘It’s like the middle ages,’ she complained as Benny approached. ‘They’ve only got a couple of computers, and they’re ancient.’

Benny looked at the handheld, a thick rubber block. ‘It’s brand new,’ she said.

Flynn scowled. ‘It can’t be. Look at it.’

‘You look at it – it’s not faded or scratched. It’s barely been used. Anyway – you don’t judge a book by its cover. What were you looking at?’

Flynn passed it over. Robot animals. It’s a catalogue of them.’ Benny clicked through what turned out to be an electronic bestiary. ‘Type IV Carnivore,’ she read.

The entry had a mark next to it indicating that the hunters had caught 13 specimens of this particular type. There was even a note saying not to catch any more.

The index revealed – eventually, as it was very slow – that there were hundreds of different types of robots here. Some, like the wolf, were well documented. Some were hypothetical or had only been barely glimpsed.

‘Are they trying to bag one of each?’ Benny asked aloud.

‘Or two – a male and a female?’

‘Do you get boy robots and girl robots?’ Benny wondered. ‘All the wolves were identical. I think there’s only one “gender”.’

‘Like the hunters,’ Flynn chuckled.

Benny looked back over at the camp, puzzled. ‘Indeed.’

Flynn was looking at the bestiary again, and then shook her head. ‘There’s nothing here about boy robots and girl robots. I was going to ask how they reproduce, but...’

‘There was no industrial activity on the planet,’ Benny said. ‘We didn’t detect the hunters, either.’

‘They’re being what used to be called “environmentally friendly”,’ Benny noted.

‘Before they blow away the wildlife.’

Benny nodded.

Makins was heading over. Behind him, the hunters were packing up, transferring what they weren’t taking into the aircars.

‘Five minutes,’ he told them.

Benny and Flynn had already packed their kit, but were unclear on what they were meant to be doing, or where they were going.

‘You’re trying to capture specimens,’ Benny told Makins. ‘Why go through the charade of a hunt? Just “bag” them, or whatever you call it, from your aircar.’

He shook his head. ‘I wish it was that easy. We got some of the bigger creatures that way – a couple of the classes of giant herbivore. But the animals soon got used to the aircars, and as soon as they saw us coming, they scattered. You can see the aircars the moment they come over the horizon, it’s impossible to sneak up on anything with them.’

‘What are we meant to be doing?’ Flynn asked.

‘This is quite an enterprise,’ Makins explained. ‘We need spotters, we need people to catalogue what we find. You told Beardmore you caught a fish... well, we need you to catch a few more.’

Benny looked over at Flynn, who shrugged.

‘There will be other duties, which you’ll be told about as soon as we know what they are. The main one is to keep out the way of the hunters when they’re doing their job.’

‘I can do that,’ Benny concluded brightly.

Valley of the Robots

The hunters took the aircars down to the foot of the mountain and those heading out on the hunt disembarked. Makins and a couple of the others would stay up at the base camp. The hunters were maintaining radio silence, except in emergencies. Makins stressed that he would only send aircars to specific rendezvous points.

Having seen her spaceship eaten by the creatures here, Benny understood the reluctance to land aircars anywhere that hadn't been carefully scouted first. There was also a practical point – their party was heading into rough terrain, and there wouldn't be that many places for a vehicle to land.

They were given a last scan to make sure they weren't carrying any electronics, metals or plastics. There were a few exceptions, of course – the bulky handheld computers, for one.

'And the guns,' Flynn pointed out.

'The guns and the bullets are ceramic,' Beardmore told them.

Benny took the emergency beacon with her, just in case. She'd done herself a deal: if the hunters' technology could detect it, she'd leave it behind. Makins scanned her, pronounced her all clear, and so she was bringing it with her. If the hunters couldn't sniff it out, she doubted the animals could. The small silver cube represented her only independent line of communication to the outside universe, and she was loathe to let it out of her sight.

The aircars ascended, and the hunting party was alone on the plain.

There were thirty of them, twenty-eight hunters, Benny and Flynn. All dressed in lightweight, vaguely camouflaged clothing. The hunters weren't military (although Benny suspected most had been soldiers at some point), and didn't have any formal hierarchy or ranks. That said, there was most definitely a pecking order, one based on age or experience, which must have meant much the same. So Beardmore was in charge. He'd divided the rest of the group into three – two groups of hunters, whose job it was to keep a lookout and keep their weapons ready, and a support group of younger hunters, Benny and Flynn to carry equipment. They moved as one party. Benny moved up the group so that she kept alongside Beardmore. The old man seemed happy to have her along.

'So, you're a famous archaeologist?'

'Yes. But these things are relative, you know, like "mature student" or "Posh Spice". You could be the most famous archaeologist in the galaxy, and still no-one would have heard of you.'

‘So are you the most famous?’

‘Heavens, no, I doubt I’m even in the top five.’

‘Makins told me about you. Said you’d been in all sorts of scraps and scrapes over the years.’

‘I have that.’

He looked over, a twinkle in his eye. ‘Ever been out to Citria?’

‘No.’

‘I recommend it. A ruined city covers the entire planet. It’s been reclaimed by the jungle. I spent a month there, bagging giant wasps.’

‘As giant as the ones I saw on Vespan IV?’

‘How big were they?’

‘Ten feet long, the wingspan was a little more than that.’

Beardmore whistled. ‘Mine were only as big as a man. Vespan IV, eh? I’ll have to make a note of that.’

‘The biggest insects I ever saw were the bees on –’

– Gallatrix,’ Beardmore finished. ‘Did you do that thing of landing your ship on one of them?’

‘Everyone does, don’t they? Good honey, though. Quality and quantity.’

The group had reached their immediate goal, the top of a rocky valley. The aircar surveys had shown a lot of the herbivores had gathered at the valley floor. They stopped to take a look.

Through borrowed binoculars, Benny saw a herd of robots the size of houses gathered at the side of the river.

The creatures’ hides were darker than the wolves’ polished surfaces. She wondered if it was some form of camouflage.

‘Don’t see any wolves,’ she said.

‘They’ll be there,’ Beardmore said gently. ‘Follow the prey, find the predator.’

‘A new variant, I think,’ Bellamy said. ‘They’re larger than the Class II herbivores, and it looks like they have trunks.’

Benny saw, now it had been pointed out, that each robot had a couple of articulated hoses that did look very much like an elephant’s trunk.

‘Doesn’t it strike you as odd that you don’t have a list of models of these robots?’ she asked.

Beardmore agreed. ‘We’ve been through this with Makins. The records were lost when the ship crashed. Our job is simply to round up the robots and do as little damage as we can.’

‘And this is the most efficient way to do it?’

‘Yes. We’ve set traps and nets for the smaller ones. But this is the best way to catch the big ones. We know we won’t get them all, but we can get almost all of them like this.’

Benny was searching the valley floor for any sign of carnivores. ‘I

still don't see them,' she told Beardmore.

'They're not designed to be seen,' he assured her.

There was a trail down the side of the valley to the floor. This was a route used by the animals, too – the dust and mud was peppered with so many tracks that they'd elided into each other. Every so often, the hunters would stop to investigate the prints, and it became clear that a wealth of different types of robots came up and down this way.

Flynn had made her way down the line of hunters until she was behind Benny.

'I don't understand why we're heading down there,' she said.

'To get to the animals?' Benny replied, puzzled.

'Can't we just shoot them from here?'

Beardmore looked back over his shoulder. 'We could shoot those big herbivores, but the first shot we fire will scare off every other creature in the area.'

The plan was to get down to the valley floor, keeping a low profile. They'd set up traps and electronets in key areas, then find ways to funnel the smaller creatures into them. They'd use the herbivores to draw out the carnivores, then disable them all with their guns. Each hunter would take a junior member of the party to help out. The hunter would do the hunting, his oppo would help him.

Benny was rather surprised when Beardmore picked her to accompany him. They were going to head right into the thick of the herbivores.

First, they had to reach the valley floor. This took an hour, in total. Close to the end of the path, there was a large dip in the ground, a natural trench that was quickly adopted as a base camp. Beardmore radioed to Makins to let him know they'd arrived in place. Then the senior hunters divvied up the territory, and they all set out to their positions.

Beardmore made it very clear to Benny that now was not the time to have a conversation. Instead, she was to mimic him – walk in the same stooped, careful way he was walking, literally following in his footsteps.

The valley floor was a moonscape, with little in the way of vegetation. The river that had carved the valley out was only about ten feet wide. It meandered, and Benny's geological instinct was that it must flood every so often, depositing stones across the valley. She bent down to pick up a stone. Soft volcanic rock, but... there was something not right. Or, at least, it was out of the ordinary.

She couldn't share her observation with Beardmore, so she kept hold of the rock and continued to follow him.

There were ten herbivores, roughly the shape of an elephant, but

three or four times the size. With each of them as big as a small house, it was a bit like heading into a cul-de-sac of a suburban town. The top and sides of their immense bodies were covered with black scales, their undersides, legs and faces were the same polished metal that Benny recognised from the wolves.

There was a great rhythmic crashing sound coming from each of the creatures, a regular beat, like the production line of a factory, rock against metal, one solid pounding smash every second.

The herbivores had four side-mounted cameras, which were swivelling independently, scanning the ground. One set of 'eyes' was long-range, looking out over the flood plain. The other set monitored the creatures' immediate surroundings.

Either instinctively, or because he'd worked this out long ago, Beardmore was sticking to the middle ground. The herbivores didn't have a blind spot, but weren't concentrating there.

He and Benny took up a position in a foxhole, surrounded by three of the vast creatures. They both pulled out scopes, and started surveying the surroundings, looking for carnivores lurking behind the rocks.

'We can talk,' Beardmore said, so softly Benny had to strain to hear him.

'They can't hear us?'

'Listen to them. They don't have microphones, they make so much noise they'd be useless. And now we're among them, they mask any sounds we make. So no carnivores will hear us, either – unless we start shooting.'

The nearest one of the giants was about ten feet away, moving parallel to them and trying to get closer to the water. Its movements were methodically slow.

'These things are deaf?'

'Completely. But they've got sharp eyes. We don't know much about them, but we know that. The herbivores –'

'No.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'We keep calling them herbivores, but they aren't. There's barely a plant down here to eat. In fact, this is the first place on the planet that I've been to that isn't a jungle or a grass plain. So don't call them herbivores.'

Beardmore rolled his eyes. 'Well, they aren't literally plant eaters. They're robots, they don't eat anything.'

Benny showed him the rock she'd picked up.

'A rock?' he asked, not unreasonably. He thought about it for a moment. 'You think they eat rocks,' he concluded.

'Yes.'

‘Why would anyone design a robot to eat rocks?’

This was a flaw in Benny’s argument.

‘I mean,’ Beardmore insisted, ‘what purpose could it be put to?’ Benny struggled with the answer, the thumping of the herbivores’ mechanical innards doing nothing to help.

‘Look at the rock,’ she said finally. ‘It’s been broken up. If this was an industrialised world, I’d say it had been quarried. The robots process the minerals, extract what they need.’

Beardmore examined it, then glanced up at the herbivores.

‘No,’ he said. ‘They’re toys. Clockwork animals that got loose.’

That was another thing that had been nagging at Benny. ‘Do you know any children with bedrooms big enough for those things?’

‘They’re ornaments,’ Beardmore said. ‘For people with big country estates. They’re moving sculptures.’

‘Making a din, aren’t they?’ Benny said. ‘Are they giant alarm clocks, perhaps? Would you really want a herd of those trampling over your lawn?’

Beardmore shook his head. ‘Look, we know what these things are. They’re designed to be hunted – that’s why we were hired, and not a bunch of engineers.’

‘Designed to be hunted?’

‘Yes.’

Benny thumbed over her shoulder. ‘You think these things would put up a challenge?’

‘Yes. Just like an elephant or Jovian mammoth would. I suggest you don’t rile one of them.’

‘Okay... I can see that the fish could be fished – although why you wouldn’t just use real fish is beyond me – I can see why the birds would make good clay pigeons. But the *mice*? Are they to keep posh people’s cats busy? The *insects*? What are they for?’

‘I don’t care what the market is for them. I have a job to do. The Bantu ship crashed, tens of thousands of brand new robots got out, they’re programmed for self-maintenance and in the wild like this they have to do that little bit more to survive. We know the robots can learn’

‘You do?’

Beardmore gave a nod. ‘They’re getting harder to catch. They can elude us, they have adopted new attack strategies.’

‘They’re improving their programming.’

‘Just like normal robots do. It makes the game more challenging. It’s just –’

– to survive here, these robots have to do that little bit more,’ Benny said thoughtfully. ‘Where’s the crashed ship?’

Beardmore looked a little embarrassed. ‘We’ve not found it,’ he

conceded. 'But before you get too excited, it's obvious the robots took the metal and recycled it. The crash site was probably in the ocean or the jungle, which is why we can't see the impact crater.'

'Handy. No evidence of the crash. Or even that there was a ship.'

'There's no evidence of your ship, either. We have about half a dozen projected landing sights for the factory ship, based on different models of the distribution of the various species.'

Benny stopped. 'There,' she said.

A carnivore, quite unlike one of the wolves, had just poked its head up over a large rock on the other side of the river.

'It was an alligator,' Benny said. 'Or a crocodile. I mean, y'know.'

'How much of it did you see?'

'Just the head.'

'Why do you think it's an alligator?'

'It looked like an alligator,' Benny replied.

She stood to see if she could get a better look.

Beardmore looked worried. 'Benny, no -'

A wolf broke cover behind Benny and pounced, hydraulic muscles propelling it straight at her.

She had time to react, dropping and rolling away.

The wolf moved forwards, thought for a moment, then swiped at her with a claw.

Beardmore was swinging his rifle round, but the wolf was so close it was hard to get an aim. Benny was standing, now, and trying to appear confident. Give the wolf the sense that she felt safe.

Confuse it, in other words.

Beardmore now had the creature at point blank range. He glanced around, worried about firing off a shot while among the herbivores.

The giant creatures had seen the wolf, and were forming a defensive circle.

The wolf bit the end off Beardmore's rifle. The way it crunched the ceramic barrel indicated it was rather disappointed. It must have looked like a good meal.

Benny grabbed Beardmore's pistol from his belt, cocked it and fired at the wolf.

Her first shot pinged off its forehead. The second missed. The third took out an eye.

The robot turned its attention to Benny.

Beardmore took his chance. He'd drawn a knife. Now he lashed at the wolf's hips, stabbing down at the edge of the metal-plated back. It was a chink in the armour.

The creature turned, clearly registering the damage. But it was too late. With a well-timed twist, Beardmore had severed the robot's spine. All four legs gave out, and the creature collapsed.

The robot moved its head around, running some sort of self test. It snapped its jaws at Benny when she got too close.

Beardmore grabbed her, and started running from the foxhole.

It didn't take Benny long to see why: the entire herd of herbivores was charging.

It was like a fleet of juggernauts heading straight towards them. The robots were all exactly the same size, programmed exactly the same way. They raised and lowered their feet in perfect unison, and it was rather an hypnotic effect: like seeing the same robot over and over in a mirror.

A particularly powerful tug on her arm from Beardmore reacquainted Benny with the urgency of the situation.

'This way,' he shouted, heading towards the river.

'Isn't that - ?' Benny began, as she splashed after him into the stream.

'We can wade it,' Beardmore shouted back.

Behind them, the herbivores weren't slowing down. The crippled wolf was crushed in the charge, its shattered body thrown up into the air as they rumbled past it.

Benny turned back the way she was running just in time to see the alligator rearing up.

It showered them in spray, opening a mouth that revealed three chainsaw rows of teeth. As soon as the mouth was fully open, the blades buzzed and roared into life. It then came crashing down on Beardmore.

Benny stayed calm – there probably wasn't any room in there for more panic – and fired a shot at the alligator.

This didn't damage the robot, but did make it turn its head to see what she was up to. Or possibly to protect its eyes.

Either way, it was no longer facing Beardmore, who managed to scramble out of the way. It was Benny's turn to grab him, now. She pulled him up and the two of them ran for the far bank of the river.

The herbivores had reached the stream. They smashed through into the water, barely aware that they were pounding the alligator into the shale. The giant robots were gaining on Benny and Beardmore. Ahead of them, every creature in the area was breaking cover and fleeing.

Benny found her footing undermined by dozens of scurrying robot mice and some sort of hopping bird. These really did resemble toys. Larger animals – including a couple of wolves – were also leaping around her, concentrating on keeping between the herbivores and ignoring Benny.

Beardmore was ahead, unclipping a radio from his belt. 'This is Beardmore, this is Beardmore. Charge triggered. Get ready if you're on the north side of the river, we're coming your way.'

Benny saw, now, that they were heading out of their area and into some other hunter team's. If they acted fast enough, that team would be able to bag the herbivores, the wolves and indeed trap most of the smaller creatures.

They'd also be able to bag themselves a Benny, if she kept running into their field of fire.

She looked back over her shoulder.

'Professor, no!' Beardmore shouted, but it was too late.

She turned on her heel, started running towards the herbivores. She ducked between the nearest two, then swerved right, sprinting through the gap between the next two.

One was now heading straight for her, and she wouldn't have time to go round it, as there were a couple of smaller, deer-like robots running towards her the way she would have gone.

She'd anticipated a problem like this. The herbivores' feet were pistons, and came up and down with mechanical precision. Benny counted carefully, then leapt under the herbivore's foot, rolling under it. She stopped herself for two seconds, then threw herself under the raised back foot.

She was upright again, and another herbivore was almost on her. She dived to her left, and had a couple of seconds' grace before the next creature. She was in the thick of the herd, now, the ground was shaking like a mattress being bounced on by a dozen angry toddlers. There were all sorts of creatures here in-between the large herbivores, being overtaken by them.

She ran between the next two giants. Halfway along, the two began to converge, and Benny was forced to throw herself under one of them, then guess her way to getting out from under the back feet. There was a terrible crash as the two herbivores jostled into each other.

That had been close. She was near the back of the herd, now.

One last herbivore was on her. It was too late...

A neat hole appeared in the herbivore's forehead, and the creature's legs collapsed. The wreckage carried on, though, ploughing through the soil like it was sand. Benny was forced to leap onto the side of the creature, found herself rolling up over the thick scales of its flank, then down the other side.

She fell into the trampled ground, luck allowing her to avoid smashing her skull or any other bone on one of the exposed rocks. Benny picked herself up.

Beardmore was heading towards her, a fresh rifle held up.

Behind him, the herbivores were being felled by the other hunters. The robots had walked straight into a killing zone, an area surrounded by shooters who could pick off their prey with relative ease.

As she waited for Beardmore to catch up with her, Benny watched as, one by one, each herbivore stopped, then skidded over. Some crashed into their fallen brothers and sisters before they had been hit. The hunters had planned this, and felled every robot efficiently. The sounds of shots filled the air, ricocheting off the valley walls, doubling and tripling as they did so.

Beardmore was shaking his head. 'Never, ever, do that again.'

'Frankly, it was a fairly unusual set of circumstances that led me to do it this time.'

Beardmore looked angry.

'What was I meant to do?' Benny argued.

'Run alongside them, in the same direction. Keep up with them, try to work your way out to the side. Did you not see the animals doing the same?'

They were standing over the herbivore that Beardmore had shot. It was the size of a scrapyard, a slumped pyramid of metal and those strange black scales. The pile was around twenty feet tall at its highest point.

'I hope I'm not meant to carry this back to base,' Benny said. Seeing it dead upset her, even though there was no logical basis. She'd never felt like this after seeing a smashed-up aircar.

She bent in to pick up one of the scales.

'What do the robots eat?' she asked.

'You asked that before.'

'You never gave me your answer.'

'They've got fusion batteries, like every other robot. They are self-recharging'

'All of them?'

'All of them.'

'This herbivore is covered in these.'

'So?'

'Do you know what they are?'

Beardmore scowled, and took the glass shard from Benny. A moment later he was looking up, and looking puzzled. 'No. Do you?'

'You've never noticed these before?'

'This is the first one of these big ones we've got close to. What is it?'

'I'm not sure. I need to check. I think it's a solar panel.'

'That makes no sense. Why bother with solar, when you can fit a fusion battery?'

Benny was heading over to the remains of the wolf that had attacked them and triggered the stampede. That seemed like it had been three days ago, but it had been no more than five minutes.

'We've studied the wolves,' Beardmore reminded her.

'You have? Personally?'

‘I haven’t. The team back at the base has. What are you looking for?’

‘Fusion batteries.’

Benny prodded the remains of the wolf with her foot. ‘It’s a very elegant design. I wish I knew what I was looking at, though.’

There wasn’t much to see. Beneath the armour plate, there was little in the way of mechanism or electronics. Less to go wrong, Benny guessed. This was the bare minimum of pistons, cables and circuits.

‘Where would the batteries be?’

‘Probably in the chest compartment.’

Benny couldn’t see any. Beardmore started to scour the ground. The first of the aircars was arriving. Someone had signalled Makins, let him know that the valley floor had been cleared far faster than anticipated.

‘I don’t see batteries,’ Beardmore admitted. ‘But I don’t see solar panels, either.’

Benny showed him the wolf. Heaved it over, flopped the limbs around, peeled off the armour plating.

‘Okay,’ she challenged him. ‘Show me where the batteries would go.’

‘What?’

‘Show me what they connected up to, show me the compartment they fitted into, show me the “Warning: High Voltage” sign.’

Beardmore was sifting through the scrap metal. ‘There has to be one.’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you?’

‘It had power. It leapt at us. If it didn’t have a battery or solar panels... then where?’

Benny shook her head. ‘I don’t know. But until we do, we won’t understand this.’

New Carnivore

They were celebrating at the base camp.

Benny was the toast of the hunters, as the stampede she'd set off had saved the hunters several days' work. As the hunters disembarked and spilled out into the base camp, every single one of them made sure they came over to shake her hand.

Makins was rather less pleased when he caught up with her.

'The specimens were badly damaged,' he told her. 'The whole point of this exercise is that we bring as many as we can back intact. Alive, if at all possible. You're as bad as these hunters. They just want to blast away at them. I don't want good clean kills, I want undamaged stock.'

Although she'd never thought he was a hunter, it hadn't occurred to Benny until now that Makins was a Bantu company representative.

'I didn't do it deliberately.'

'No. So Beardmore says. Damaged stock still has its uses.'

'You can repair them?'

'Usually.'

'You don't have the ship's inventory? You don't know how many robots there are?'

'No. But there will come a point when this salvage mission has recovered enough to be profitable. The factory ship represented almost 1% of Bantu's productivity the year it crashed.'

'I don't remember hearing about the loss of the ship.'

Makins gave a thin smile, the only type of smile he seemed capable of. 'We were hardly going to boast about it.'

He returned to his post, leaving Benny to rejoin the hunters.

Beardmore and Bellamy were signing off a manifest. The animals had been listed, then picked up by heavy aircars and taken straight to the main base – a place that remained elusive to Benny and Flynn. All the time, the hunters had kept careful watch, in case predators decided to take advantage of the scrap carrion lying around the valley floor. A few of the more choice specimens had been brought back to the base camp for Makins to examine. They'd been placed in a large pressure tent in the centre of the camp.

'You're bringing us luck,' Bellamy told her.

She was still aching, and didn't feel lucky. Nor did she fancy celebrating with the hunters. Instead, she went looking for Flynn. She found the young woman at the edge of the base camp. Flynn was nursing a bottle of some drink even she didn't recognise.

‘Flynn Noele. What do you know about robots?’

‘What?’ the young woman was already a little out of it.

‘You know your electronics.’

‘Yeah, suppose.’

‘I don’t know anything about robot power supplies.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Nothing technical. I’ve unearthed robots before, and bits of robots. I can recognise most of the classical technological branches. But I don’t know anything about the power demands.’

Flynn sniffed the air. ‘Yeah. Well, I know some of that stuff.’

Benny told her about the robot wolf, and its lack of batteries.

‘It had batteries,’ Flynn insisted. ‘Or it had some sort of power supply. You just didn’t know what you were looking at. If I’d had a look at it.’

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘That’s what I just said. Are you up to it now?’

‘Now?’ Flynn looked at the bottle of alcohol. Or the half of it that was left. ‘No. I just want to sleep’ She stood, a little unsteadily.

‘We need to at least talk,’ Benny insisted.

Flynn looked around. ‘Show me where our tent is.’

Benny did just that, opening it up for Flynn. Flynn was shrugging herself out of her trousers the moment she crossed the threshold.

‘Robot power sources,’ Benny said firmly.

‘Sleep,’ Flynn replied, grabbing her sleeping bag.

‘I found this on the herbivore,’ she said. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a solar panel.’

‘You’re sure?’

Flynn looked at it again, for about a second. ‘Yes.’

‘How can you tell?’

Flynn scowled at her. ‘Because it’s a solar panel. Can I get some sleep, now?’

The wolf doesn’t have solar panels,’ Benny said.

Flynn yawned. ‘Yeah well, it’s a carnivore.’

‘What?’

‘Carnivores eat herbivores. Herbivores collect the energy. The carnivores steal the energy the herbivores have collected, by eating them’

‘Beardmore says they’re toys. What you’re talking about is an entire ecosystem’

‘Two things: it’s so simple it barely qualifies as a system. And... I’m joking. I’m out my face on shock and drink, Professor. I’ve been walking all day, I can barely hear the words I’m saying, let alone string them together.’

Benny made a mental note that Flynn was having no trouble

stringing words together.

‘A joke?’ she said, disappointed.

‘A joke,’ Flynn assured her.

Benny waited two minutes, until Flynn was fast asleep, then left her to doze, locking the tent behind her.

She was also canny enough to take the booze for herself. She swigged a little. A lesser woman wouldn’t have coped as well as Benny with the resulting jolt of liquid fire. It was very... peppery. Not actually very nice. She drank a little more, just to make sure, and returned to the group of hunters.

The next day, the hunting party set out again.

Flynn looked a little green around the gills. Benny felt terrible, but felt that the most inspiring and helpful thing she could do for Flynn was to put up a front that the drink hadn’t affected her in the slightest. Benny was playing things a little more perky and quippy than usual.

Beardmore still wanted Benny as his point person, but before they left, he took her aside.

‘Don’t do anything like you did yesterday.’

‘It was an accident.’

‘That’s what I mean. There were about ten different ways you should have been killed yesterday. You’re combat trained, aren’t you?’ Beardmore asked.

Benny raised an eyebrow. ‘A very long time ago, and it didn’t really stick.’

‘It never goes away,’ Beardmore assured her. ‘You’ve been to all sorts of hostile environments. You’ve done survival courses. Zero-gee, hard vacuum, rad-zone.’

‘Er... yes. Again, a while ago. I didn’t always get formal training first.’

‘If you had, the first thing your instructor would have told you is that places like this don’t forgive you. One mistake, one lapse in concentration, and you’re lucky if you survive. You were very lucky indeed yesterday.’

Benny couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone seven consecutive days without nearly dying at least once, and she didn’t appreciate the lecture. All the more so in this case, because it was obvious Beardmore had a point.

‘You need to talk to Flynn, too,’ she said. ‘And you need to consider taking us off the hunt.’

Beardmore rounded on Benny. ‘You think we didn’t consider that? It wasn’t just your life you put in danger yesterday. You’re an experienced traveller, Professor Summerfield. You should know

better.'

Benny found it difficult to argue, and settled for seething to herself.

Three hours later, they were in the jungle. The leaf canopy shielded them from the morning sun, but the air was more thick and heavy than Benny remembered from the day of the crash.

As the hunters made their way through dense undergrowth, they laid snares and rodent traps. These devices would signal base when they were full, and a team of bearers would come this way to collect them this time tomorrow. The traps weren't simply there to collect specimens – trapped animals would be excellent bait for the larger and more elusive predators.

Flynn was one of those laying traps, and setting up electronets to trap birds and flying insects. Benny managed a few words with her. The young woman was uncommunicative, but told Benny she would rather be here doing something than at base camp.

By noon, they'd more than exceeded their targets.

As they stopped to eat in a jungle clearing, the hunters were keen to carry on attributing their good luck to Benny. Benny smiled helplessly as each of them took turns to shake her hand. The two groups of people in the galaxy who seemed to be most superstitious were, in Benny's judgement, actors and soldiers. Both professions relied on the dumb luck of being in the right place at the right time. With the hunters, it was a matter of life and death. People died, quickly and for no good reason. Like Johannsen had. Stop and think, and you might see the universe as a hostile, arbitrary place. It was more comforting to believe in lucky tokens. That way, the universe had guiding principles, and appealing to or appeasing the right powers might let you survive and prosper.

Beardmore had always appeared more pragmatic than that, but even he had brought up the subject of Benny's continuing survival more than once. He was keeping her close because he thought she would help keep him alive. She wondered if it was a conscious decision. The most powerful beliefs, she always thought, were the ones that people didn't realise they held. Values hardwired into the human brain, then the things society never even questioned.

There were some intelligent species with no conception of religion or commerce. It wasn't that they were all atheists or communists, or whatever. It had just never occurred to them. The first century or so of human contact with alien civilisations had led to more mutual incomprehension than it had open warfare. The missionaries and merchants who'd swarmed across Earth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had often encountered people with different concepts of god and ownership... but they had, at least, had the

concepts in there, somewhere. Aliens were alien. They did things differently.

Humans just took it for granted that if you handed a shopkeeper a certain type of metal disc or piece of paper, he would give you, say, a bunch of bananas, a pot of jam, a magazine and a few smaller metal discs. We could understand that animals don't use money, or that primitive tribes might use rare shells instead of coins, or that money was based on certain guarantees that needed enforcing. But it was just money. The most natural thing in the world. It was actually quite a peculiar way of doing things. Most alien races had evolved past it or simply not bothered in the first place.

If Benny had asked Beardmore whether he believed she was bringing him luck, he would have harrumphed and twitched his moustache and denied it.

But, once again, as the hunting party set off for the afternoon's business, he was standing right next to her.

The jungle was almost uncannily quiet.

Most rain forests hissed with steam and the rustling of leaves. Birds, insects, reptiles, amphibians, mammals all had distinctive cries and calls. The robot animals didn't seem to.

Every so often, they'd hear a herbivore crashing through the trees, like a bulldozer clearing the way for a road. A group of three or four would detach from the main hunting party and go after it. For now, they'd simply trail it, hoping it would lead them to a watering hole, or other robots.

Tracking prey like that, they'd be quiet, but the rest of the time they spoke normally. The worst thing you could do, apparently, was take an animal by surprise. If they'd stumbled into one of the robots, it might automatically go on the offensive.

Assuming it behaved like a real animal, of course.

Soon, it was only Beardmore, Benny, Bellamy, Flynn and six of the younger hunters left. The only one whose name Benny knew was a blonde boy called Marcus. They were about six miles into the jungle. A mile back, they'd come across a wide river. They followed its course, further into the trees.

Benny was concerned about the alligators and their chainsaw teeth. Bellamy agreed. Beardmore doubted they would lurk here, though they'd not seen a herbivore worth catching for a long time.

An hour further down the river, they saw a pack of wolves, and tried to bag them, but the animals eluded them.

'We're getting rusty,' Bellamy grumbled.

'How do you mean?' the first words Flynn had said for a long while. 'When we first landed, we could bag a wolf like *that*. We're getting

tired.'

'Or they're getting better at escaping,' Benny suggested.

Beardmore looked back at her, over his shoulder.

'If they were built to be hunted, it wouldn't be much of a sport if they didn't adapt,' Benny reminded him.

Beardmore scowled. 'If you've got something to say, say it.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You do. I keep telling you the situation here. A bunch of robots got loose. We've got to round them up. It's simple enough. But you keep giving me knowing glances and evasive answers. You clearly have some conspiracy theory. Well, I'd like to hear it.'

Benny hesitated. She really didn't want to say anything, yet. She had to choose her words carefully.

'I think Makins is a lying bastard,' she said, after some reflection.

Beardmore smiled. 'Yes, so do I. What I don't know is what he's hiding. He pays well, he's organised all the equipment we asked for. He clearly has corporate backing.'

'He's lying to you about the robots,' Benny said. 'He says they're just clockwork toys that got out of their box. But there's clearly more to them than that. Have you ever seen robots like this? You're a hunter. These are meant to be for hunters. Have you ever seen anything like this?'

'They're not for hunters. They're for rich idiots who are too squeamish to kill a real animal.'

'But have you ever seen anything for sale like the robots here?'

Beardmore shook his head. 'There are moving targets for hunters, and most clay pigeons these days have some sort of AI, but there's nothing as...'

... decorative?' Benny suggested.

'Decorative. Thank you. It's like nothing I've ever seen. It doesn't mean that they don't exist, of course, it's a big galaxy, but I do spend quite a lot of my life looking at hunting equipment. Got to keep up, got to have an edge. They could be a special order, I suppose.'

'A special order?'

'You know: custom-built for a particular client. There are plenty of people in the Sector rich enough. Look, these things aren't that smart, they aren't that fast. You saw that for yourself – they sit around, wondering what to do.'

Benny absorbed that, still trying to collate the data. She got the feeling that if she got a chance to sit down, or if it wasn't so hot, or if she wasn't keeping at least one eye out for wolves, or if she wasn't quite so hung over, that she'd have managed to piece it all together.

'There's something more to this,' Benny said.

Beardmore's lip curled up a little. 'When is there not?'

‘You said it yourself: the robots are getting better at eluding you. They’re learning, Beardmore. Acting like wild animals.’

An hour later, they set up camp in a sheltered area formed by two vast, fallen trees. There was a stream running through it, and the hunters took turns to splash their faces and fill their water bottles.

Flynn was looking hot and flustered. Benny went over.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m not as bad as I should be,’ she said. ‘The walking and keeping a lookout is helping.’

‘This has got to be good experience,’ Benny said, wishing she could swallow her words as she said them.

‘Good experience?’ Flynn repeated.

‘I didn’t mean that. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean Johannsen.’ The first time either of them had spoken his name for a long time.

‘I know what you mean,’ Flynn said quickly. And I know you didn’t want him dead, or do anything that put him in danger.’

Not directly, Benny thought, but if I hadn’t hired him...

‘And you’re right: I signed up for a straightforward recon mission, I’ve ended up in the middle of something bigger and more complicated. I’m learning a lot.’

‘Do you understand the hunters’ mission?’

Flynn nodded. ‘What wouldn’t I understand about it?’

‘Have you thought about it?’

‘Yeah. I don’t understand the low-tech approach. They’ve been here... however long it’s been... and they still haven’t quantified the problem. The first thing I’d have done is do some low detector sweeps of the whole area.’

‘You could do that?’

‘Looking for that space probe was a lot harder. Give me about six hours, and I could have found every robot on the surface from orbit,’ Flynn laughed.

‘What? From the *Sataspes*?’

Flynn nodded. ‘It was a hunter, too, in its way, remember? A ship designed to locate things.’

‘So the hunters’ ship wouldn’t have the same detectors?’

‘We’ve not seen the hunters’ ship, and it probably won’t be a specialist salvage ship, but any standard detector system could easily be modified to scan the surface of a planet. Now maybe Makins, or whatever his name is, has done that, but... well, he doesn’t seem to have given the results to the hunters.’

Benny shifted a little closer to Flynn. ‘So, what would you do, if you were Makins?’

‘I’d do that survey, assess where all the robots were. Then I’d keep

the ship in a geostationary orbit over the dispersal area, and keep track of them all in real time.'

Benny needed to make sure she understood. 'What do you mean by dispersal area?'

Flynn was keen to educate the Professor. 'It's just like looking for that Eagle probe. We know the search parameters.'

'Walking or flying distance for the fastest robots to emerge from the crashed factory ship.'

'Yes. Now, it's possible that's the whole planet. Say a wolf can move ten miles a day.'

Benny tried to do the maths. 'Er... it could have walked round the planet.'

'No it couldn't... but two robots heading in the opposite directions would have bumped into each other after two years.'

'If the robots eat metal, why would they leave the crash area?'

'It's just ridiculous the hunters haven't found the crash site. Do you know how vast some of those factory ships are? They're bigger than cities.'

Benny fanned herself with her hat. 'I studied images of the planet's surface. There was nothing like that down here. Then again, I didn't see the whole planet, it might have been the hemisphere that wasn't visible as we crashed.'

Flynn was shaking her head. 'But the first thing you do is find it. It's basic prep work. The hunters just don't know what they're doing.'

Benny was troubled by that conclusion. She'd spent a lot of time now with Beardmore, and he was a smart man, an experienced tracker.

'It doesn't add up,' Benny concluded again, no nearer to the correct answer.

'No it -'

There was a man's scream from the other side of camp.

They attacked without warning.

The first leapt out from over one of the felled trees, onto the back of one of the spotters. The weight of the creature probably broke his back, the bite to the neck with great curving fangs killed him if he wasn't already dead. The animal was leaping away from the body before it had hit the ground.

Benny pulled Flynn undercover.

'We should help,' Flynn said.

'How?'

So they watched.

The hunters turned as one to face the creature, which was standing on all fours over the fallen body of the spotter.

It was another carnivore, a type Benny hadn't seen before. It was smaller than the wolves, more squat, with powerful front legs and a vestigial tail. But what distinguished it was its head. It was a small cranium, but with vast, curved fangs. Genuine sabres on a sabretoothed tiger. It was the same polished silver as the wolves, with the same sinister beauty.

'Why's it just standing there?' Benny asked. Then she remembered Beardmore. These things weren't that bright. It was recalculating.

The hunters followed that cue, taking careful aim at the beast with their rifles, taking their time.

And the jungle opened up and took almost every one of them apart.

The plants ripped aside, like curtains on a stage, one sabretooth for every human being there. Every one of them did exactly the same thing, perfectly timed and synchronised – they burst out of the foliage, already on a perfect trajectory to land on a man's back, their head up, ready to bite.

Benny saw Marcus go down, already dead, his face calm because he hadn't had time to register his own death. Bellamy was also on the ground, bleeding and twitching.

There were two sabretooths left. They stomped into the camp, searching for their quarry.

Benny pulled Flynn back as the first one found them. It pounced, but the two women were sheltered by the fallen tree. Its skull slammed into the wood, making it shake. An animal might have been concussed, or even a little dazed. The robot just backed off, then tried again. This second time, the trunk shook. The sabretooth started butting away at it, its head a battering ram.

The next time its face was close enough, Benny threw her water at it.

The creature backed off for a moment, assessing the attack. Within a few seconds, it had established that there was no damage, and resumed its efforts.

Benny and Flynn were safe for the moment – if you defined 'safe' rather loosely – but the fallen trunk was already begin to dislodge from the soil.

Beyond them, the shooting had all but stopped. There were dead and dismembered hunters all around. Benny could see Bellamy's body, great puncture wounds straight through the collarbone. The sabretooths had almost all withdrawn. Clearly, each had been programmed to kill one hunter, then leave.

There were two left, then... no... three. One battering at Benny and Flynn, one circling, and one prowling the camp.

Benny's hand had found a rock. Flynn had to shift out of the way for Benny to get it free.

She whacked the sabretooth in the eye, breaking the camera lens. It withdrew and charged again, like nothing had happened. As it loomed up, Benny brought the rock down a second time.

The sabretooth pulled back, reeling.

The other two creatures looked up at it.

The damaged robot was unsteady. Did it have a sense of touch, Benny wondered. It was lowering each leg tentatively, and appeared to have lost its sense of balance.

The other two sabretooths leapt onto it, breaking its spine, punching those curved fangs into its back and neck. They fed on it, tearing clumps of metal and wires out, fighting each other as they reached the middle.

Benny scrambled out from under the tree, grabbed the nearest rifle from where it had fallen, and blasted the sabretooths until all three were dead.

Flynn found Beardmore still alive, propped up against a rock, shaking.

‘Blood loss,’ he said. ‘Get radio.’

Flynn retrieved it, and fumbled to activate it. ‘Makins,’ the hunter rasped, then rattled off something that was presumably a map reference, before fainting.

Now, finally, they were taken to the hunters’ main base.

The medivac team arrived within an hour, three men in heavy body armour and high-powered machine pistols jumping out of a large aircar before the two medics, also armoured, emerged.

Benny had managed to stem Beardmore’s blood loss. She and Flynn had been able to retrieve the medical supplies from the dead hunters and bearers. Combined, the packs had been enough keep him alive.

The three of them had sat slumped together, surrounded by the dead, rifles propped up around them, dreading the return of the sabretooths until help had arrived.

It was still only the early afternoon. Beardmore was carefully lifted into the aircar, and treated. Benny and Flynn sat in the same compartment, as their rescuers loaded the dead sabretooths aboard. Another team would be sent for the bodies of the hunting party.

The aircar turned on its axis and shot away at what must have been near supersonic speed.

Benny was sat by the window. She could see it all – the flocks of birds, flying at far lower altitude. Below them, the herds of herbivores making their way through the grass plains. A long, wide, river wove through the land, like a vast silver snake.

On this planet, of course, it might have been a silver snake that looked like a river.

There hadn't been any snakes so far, she realised.

She was a little shell-shocked. Flynn was dozing next to her, utterly exhausted. Beardmore was unconscious, but would live. Indeed, one of the medics thought he might be up and hunting again as early as tomorrow.

The medics tending to Beardmore asked Benny to donate blood – they were the same type. Benny also did what she could to tell the medics who had died, but she didn't know all the names, and they didn't have photographs.

'Don't worry, the recovery team will be able to sort all that out,' the medic said, almost cheerfully.

An hour later, they reached the base.

It was the hunters' starship, hovering over the grass plains on antigravs, but as imposing and solid as the landscape around it. It was a vast wing, and looked for all the world like a steel boomerang at rest in the sky. It was a large ship, and as they flew closer, Benny kept revising the estimate of its size upwards, eventually fixing on about a four hundred metre span. She'd assumed that there were only a few dozen hunters on the planet, but it was clear from this that there were hundreds, if not thousands.

The aircar didn't slow down as it flew into the vast hangar bay, only coming to an abrupt – and, to its passengers and crew, perfectly smooth – halt when it reached its docking cradle.

Beardmore was rushed from the ship to a medical bay.

Benny and a sleepy Flynn were led from the ship into a reception area. This was a large, L-shaped room. The walls were an unappealing brown, and – to Benny's taste at least – the decor wasn't improved by the rows of trophy heads lining the room. There were all sorts of creatures Benny recognised, and all sorts she didn't. She knew for a fact that four of the beasts displayed here were now extinct.

This was an old ship. She suspected it had been built for the galactic wars that had been raging for a generation when she was a child, then bought by the hunters when it was decommissioned at the end of the wars. Old wasn't always bad – indeed, much technological expertise had been lost in the wars and never replaced. This ship, if her theory was right, had been built to take a lot of punishment. The hunters had clearly refitted the ship when they'd bought it, but not for decades since.

Beardmore must have been a young man, back then. Benny didn't have any idea how these hunters were organised. She guessed they had a guild or a union, or perhaps it was run like a gentlemen's club. This ship was large, and would be expensive to run. She imagined the hunters – or most of them – would have to live here permanently. A

relatively strange life, but about one in five human beings lived in a space station or other artificial habitat rather than living on a planet or planetoid.

After half an hour, one of the medics returned to tell Benny and Flynn that Beardmore was conscious. He confirmed that the other seven people who'd stuck with the main group, including Bellamy, were dead. There had been no radio contact with any of the hunters or spotters who'd left the main party to track specific herbivores.

Twenty-nine hunters had been killed, or were missing, presumed dead.

Then, she and Flynn were taken to Makins and they told him what had happened.

Makins' room was an improvised office, clearly a guest room. One of the sabretooths Benny had shot was lying in the middle. Dead, it looked like an abstract sculpture.

A technician was scanning the robot.

'The closest terrestrial animal is the dinofelis,' he was telling Makins. He handed him a small computer pad.

'The what?' Makins asked, but the technician was already heading out of the door.

'An ancient species of sabretoothed cat,' Benny told him. The name rang a bell. She moved over to Makins' desk computer, and started tapping away.

Flynn stepped between Benny and Makins, keeping him away. 'Why didn't you warn them?' she asked.

'Warn them?'

'You have a list of the robots,' Flynn pressed. 'Why didn't you tell us about the sabretooths?'

Makins' mouth twitched. 'They were experienced hunters. They knew the risks.'

Flynn smiled, looked around Makins' makeshift office, clearly noting the quality of the decor, the size of the fallen sabretooth, and Benny at the computer console, then jumped on the thin little man, punching him in the face a couple of times.

'That isn't what I asked,' she yelled.

She pulled back.

Benny was a little surprised, but she was hardly displeased. Makins had dropped the computer pad, and Benny quietly pocketed it, pretending that all she was doing was helping the Bantu executive up.

'You're lying to us,' she told Makins, returning to the desk console. 'I knew that before, but I didn't say anything, and now twenty-three people are dead.'

'Twenty-two.' Makins corrected.

'And Johannsen,' Flynn reminded him. He flinched as she said it.

‘Why didn’t you tell us about the sabretooths?’ she asked again. ‘I didn’t know about them.’

Flynn looked him right in the eye. ‘No? What exactly did your company tell you? That there was a ship with some robots on it, but they didn’t know how many, or what designs? Didn’t you ask why?’

‘They’re experimental,’ Makins said carefully.

‘Experimental?’

‘Experimental.’

Flynn moved forward, making Makins yelp.

‘They were programmed to adapt,’ he squealed. ‘They analyse their surroundings and rebuild using available metals. They’re programmed to survive.’

Flynn took a step back. ‘They *evolve*?’

Makins shrugged. ‘Pedantically, no. It’s not successive generations, it’s the same individual robots, upgrading themselves. But it’s the same process – survival based on the ability to survive in the environment they find themselves in. Any list we give the hunters would be out of date.’

Benny stood there, stared at the machine for a moment. ‘Dinofelis,’ she said, finally.

Makins and Flynn were stepping over to look at the primitive green screen.

‘I knew I’d heard the name. One fact about dinofelis marked them out as unique among all the creatures who’ve ever evolved on Earth,’ Benny said. ‘They appeared on the African plains around five million years ago, thrived for the next four million years. There were big cats already, but dinofelis were specially adapted to catch a specific type of prey which lived in the grasslands and had particularly large brains. No existing predators had the combination of speed and cunning needed to catch them. Their prey were baboons, and another primate species: *Australopithecus*, the hominids who would evolve into human beings.’

Benny took a deep breath, and turned her attention back to Makins. ‘Dinofelis was the only animal on Earth that ever evolved specifically to prey on humans. And now there’s such a creature on this planet, too.’

Gathering Intelligence

There were a number of implications of what Benny had just said. Many of these were clearly running through Makins' mind.

'No,' he said. 'You're falling into the second oldest trap in the history of evolutionary science. You're assuming intent on the part of the animals.'

'Damn right I am,' Benny agreed.

'No,' Makins repeated. 'No. It doesn't work like that. We say things like "a giraffe's long neck evolved to eat the tall leaves", but it didn't. It happened that the animals with long necks could eat more leaves, so they got more food, so they survived longer and so had more, or more successful, offspring. But no giraffe actually thinks about getting a longer neck, or plans it. How long did it take for the giraffe's neck to grow that long? Millions of years.'

Benny smiled. She'd thought of this already. 'These aren't giraffes. These are machines. They've already been designed, and one of the things they were designed for was to adapt. They are programmed to control the process'

Makins was shaking his head. 'This is nonsense. Robots don't evolve. They don't even reproduce. Look at that thing –' the sabretooth in the middle of the room – 'it's a machine.'

'I don't understand how they do it,' Benny admitted. 'But we already know the robots have developed an ecosystem, and –'

'– only you think that,' Makins reminded her. He paused, decided to sound more conciliatory. 'Benny, you're a smart woman, but you're an archaeologist, not a cyberneticist or an evolutionary biologist.'

Flynn had been staring him down the whole time. 'I'm a scientist, I know about electronic systems. I don't understand what's going on here. What Professor Summerfield says is a more convincing explanation than anything you've said. Whether you call it evolution or not, the robots have adapted to our presence. If someone wanted to design a robot to kill humans, they couldn't do a much better job than this sabretooth'

Makins was waving his hand now, trying to signal an end to the conversation. 'Rubbish,' he said. 'Plenty of robots have been designed to kill humans, by other humans and by aliens. None of them look like this.'

'None of them were working with the materials to hand here,' Benny replied instantly. They were still firmly in territory she'd already thought about. 'They have to cut their cloth according to their

means.'

She'd lost Flynn, though.

Benny tried to explain: 'This sabretooth looks a lot like an upgraded version of the wolf. I'm sure if we did a comparative analysis of the components, we'd see that it's virtually identical. As identical as an aircar company's family saloon this year and last year, anyway.'

Makins had pressed a control on his desk. 'No,' he said simply.

The door slid open, and two heavysset men walked in. Both were wearing slate-grey suits, not the sort of thing the hunters wore at all. Bantu security, Benny guessed.

'I'm not having you analysing these robots,' Makins told her. 'These are the latest Bantu designs.'

'They aren't though,' Benny shouted, as one of the goons reached her. 'You didn't design these things. They might have started as yours, but they redesigned themselves.'

'It's prototype Bantu technology,' Makins insisted. 'It will be examined by Bantu engineers. No-one else.'

The security guards didn't need to touch Benny or Flynn to get their message across: the meeting with Makins was over.

Benny and Flynn had been assigned a twin room. They were taken there. As they stepped in, the door was closed behind them, but a quick check proved it wasn't locked. The room was small, with a curved back wall.

Their possessions, such as they were, had been assembled here, along with a change of clothes, and a set of items you'd expect to find in a hotel room: toiletries, towels and a dressing gown. No minibar, though.

Benny tossed the computer pad she'd 'borrowed' from Makins' office over to an astonished Flynn.

'See what you can find out,' she suggested, 'I need a shower.'

No human being, after centuries of trying any number of approaches, had managed to come up with a shower that you could just step into and use. There was always the initiation rite of working out the controls, followed by the ritual of trying to get the water to the right temperature, followed by uttering profane oaths to the gods about getting them to stop either scalding or freezing you.

Benny conducted this ceremony for a minute or two, settling for 'a little too hot'.

She realised she was washing blood from her hands and face. None of it her own. She let the water soak into her shoulders.

Flynn burst in, and Benny found herself covering herself with her hands.

'Noele, if you want to see me in the shower, there are more polite

ways of arranging it. This is the second time you've burst in on me.' Benny relaxed, and Flynn turned away.

'I'm sorry,' the young woman stammered. 'I found out something. A possible way for the robots to upgrade themselves.'

Benny raised an eyebrow. It counted as a reasonable excuse for coming in. Flynn was holding the computer pad up over her shoulder, still faced the other way.

'I've been looking through the parts. There are a couple of very interesting things.'

She waited for Benny to ask her to elaborate. Benny did so.

'First, there are no Bantu components.'

Benny hesitated. 'None?'

'Almost all the parts are listed as "unknown manufacturer".'

Benny turned the shower off. Bantu ought to recognise their own components, even if they were prototypes or they'd been adapted.

'What's the second thing?' she asked as she stepped out and grabbed a towel.

'They've identified parts of the central processor and some of the upgraded servos.'

Flynn handed the pad back to Benny, still not looking round. She wiped her glasses, which had condensed while Benny studied the display.

"Petuarian origin"?' Benny asked, puzzled.

'Yes. Don't you see?'

Benny didn't. She tried, and failed, to work it out as she dabbed herself dry.

'When the wolves ate our ship, they ate the electronic and mechanical components and incorporated them into their bodies,' Flynn said. 'It has to be that. The hunters aren't from Petuaria, Bantu has no significant presence there. But we came from there, and so did the ship.'

'We've only been here a couple of days. Could the robots really evolve so quickly?'

'If they had the right program, of course they could.'

Benny stopped in her tracks. 'It's why the sabretooths are faster,' she said. 'The wolves had older components. Looking at these specs, they're almost painfully slow. Our ship had state of the art processors. Now the sabretooths do.'

'Not state of the art. Last year's perhaps, but –'

'They have the same processing power as the ship's computers?'

'Give or take. And those new tusks are made from the same alloy as the hull.'

Benny was still scrolling down the list. 'This explains why the hunters are so keen not to use high technology. It pollutes the gene

pool of the native robots. But it doesn't explain why Bantu would build robots who could do this in the first place.'

Flynn clearly had something on her mind. She wasn't looking at Benny, she was thinking something through. Unsure whether to share. Benny suggested she did.

'The ship had AI,' Flynn told Benny. Limited AI, but it was intelligent.'

'So?'

'If they've taken that, too, then these robots are sentient.'

Benny stopped herself from blurting out her first reaction to that, and made a more considered response: 'We don't know that.'

'We can infer it. So they're subject to Earthspace first contact protocols and full protection as sentients under Galactic Law.'

'No. No.'

Flynn crossed her arms.

'They're artificial,' Benny said.

'Doesn't matter. Cyborgs and uploads count as sentient, so why not robots?'

'No,' Benny repeated. 'It's borderline, at best,' she conceded, 'but they're animals.'

Flynn looked at her meaningfully. 'They adapt and improve themselves,' she said triumphantly. 'They can do that almost overnight'

'Damn,' Benny said quietly.

'If they aren't intelligent life now, they soon will be. Look, I agree that it's not a clear-cut case, but it's one that has to go to a court, yes?'

Benny could see a lot of lawyers getting very rich discussing this. The rights of artificial intelligence were something of a grey area. Alan Turing, one of the early computer pioneers, had foreseen the problem: the moment computers got as intelligent as people, they'd be far more intelligent than people. They'd be able to recall information faster and more precisely, they'd be able to analyse the workings of their minds with total accuracy, diagnosing and repairing any problems. Computer minds would not, in other words, be remotely like human minds.

It had been early in the twenty-first century when household appliances started to get smarter than the people using them. Intelligent washing machines could wash clothes with precision and skills undreamed of by a human being. Intelligent vehicles could drive faster and more safely than any test pilot or racing driver. They could even converse with their owners. But they were idiot savants. Washing machines talked about washing. Of course, connected up to the datanets and their owner's personal databases, they could refer to the weather forecasts and itineraries and chat about what should be worn.

But they couldn't stray beyond washing. They couldn't improve themselves.

So they weren't sentient.

That was the theory, anyway. A number of lawyer software packages soon came along to challenge this definition. Nearly five hundred years later, there were still test cases, class actions and new rulings. Every planet had a slightly different interpretation of the law. Most AIs were subject to strict limitations and safeguards.

It occurred to Benny that any, say, evil corporation like, say, Bantu that wanted to experiment with advancing artificial intelligence would do well to come to an uncharted planet and operate in conditions of near total secrecy.

It also struck her that there were plenty of planets where animals had never developed intelligence. There was nothing inevitable about intelligence evolving.

'We need to tell someone.'

'We can't trust anyone here,' Flynn snapped back.

Benny thought they could trust one person.

She quickly got dry and dressed, and set out to find Beardmore.

The ship's corridors were bustling with hunters, either those in full gear or those in more casual clothing. Benny needed to get involved in three or four quite lengthy conversations to find out where Beardmore was (the ship's hospital, a few levels up from Benny's guest room), and during the course of those chats she discovered that the hunts had been called off and the hunters recalled to the ship because of the sabretooths. Some of the hunters saw the new beast as a challenge, and couldn't wait to face it. Most were more wary.

When Benny found Beardmore, he was on a running machine in a gymnasium close to the ship's hospital, jogging in casual clothes. He looked well and, if he had scars and bandages, he'd chosen to hide them.

'I've got some evidence about what Bantu are up to,' she told him.

Beardmore kept jogging. 'Go on,' he said, non-committal.

'Everyone on the hunt died,' Benny reminded him. 'If Makins had been honest with you, they might not have done.'

Beardmore turned to her, his feet still pounding away at the treadmill. 'They knew the risks.'

'They didn't, that's my point. They aren't toy animals, Beardmore, they're machines adapting themselves to an ecological niche. They're wild. And... there's another thing. Flynn thinks they may be sentient.'

Beardmore stopped the machine. 'No. We're big game hunters, Professor Summerfield, not mercenaries.'

'I'm not saying you knew,' Benny said quickly. 'And I admit I don't

know that they *are* intelligent. That's why we need to do more research.'

'Research?' he said darkly.

'We need to capture a live sabretooth. We might be able to see it evolve, or upgrade. We don't understand how they do that, yet. We could see if it's possible to communicate.'

'You want to talk to one' Not a question.

'Yes. If they can be talked to.'

'You saw my men die, Benny,' he replied. She didn't think he'd called her anything but 'Professor Summerfield' before then.

'I'm doing this because I don't want anyone else to die,' she said. 'You have no evidence.'

'I have a handheld computer, which gives a component list of the sabretooths.'

'Where did you get that?'

'I... borrowed it from Makins' office.'

He walked past her, heading to the door.

'Where are you going?' Benny called.

He turned as he reached the door, stood in the doorway. 'Makins is my employer, you're a thief. You've caused enough trouble. The Guild was called in to do a job. Shoot some tin animals. It was a bloody joke, but the money was good.'

Benny followed him out. 'And you were lied to.'

'I don't care any more. I want to get the job done and get off this planet. Hunt some flesh and blood.'

He was bristling, now. Wounded pride. Benny realised she was going to have to tread carefully. She wasn't sure, yet, quite what she was asking of this man and so she had no idea how he would respond. She wasn't his lucky token any more, that was for certain.

* * * *

Benny returned to her room. She'd need to come up with a plan.

Flynn was sitting in a dressing gown, drying her hair.

'What did he say?' Flynn wondered.

'He didn't.' Benny had put the emergency beacon under her pillow. She checked it, and confirmed it was still active.

'What would you need?' Benny asked.

'Time,' Flynn said. 'If they can go from being wolves to sabretooths in the few days we've been here, they'll develop intelligence.'

That made sense to Benny. Especially as the robots had taken the advanced computer chips from the *Sataspes*.

A thought struck her. 'How many AI components were there on our ship?'

Flynn shrugged. 'Depends what you mean.'

‘How many artificial intelligences could you build with that hardware?’

Flynn seemed a little pained. ‘I still don’t understand the question.’

‘Okay. If we wanted to cannibalise the ship for parts, there would be a limited number of parts. If I wanted to make a lamp, say, I’d have a limited number of bulbs.’

Flynn nodded. ‘Right. Well, AI is software, so it can be copied.’

‘The facilities existed on the ship?’

‘No, you need special duplicators.’

All her life, Benny had been surrounded with intelligent computers, and yet she knew nothing about how they worked.

‘Can they split themselves up?’

‘Yeah... if they’ve been programmed to. A firewall around an AI is one of the standard safeguards, though. Stops them getting out.’ Flynn paused. ‘Or it’s meant to. People in the twenty-first century seemed to have a knack for developing technology that *got out* – nanotech, GM, buckyballs, AI. Who would have enforced a firewall here?’

‘We need to –’

The door slid open.

‘Hey!’ Flynn shouted, pulling her dressing gown around herself.

It was the two goons that had thrown them out of Makins’ office.

‘Collect your things,’ one of them grunted.

‘You,’ the other said to Flynn. ‘Get dressed.’

‘What’s going on?’ Benny asked.

‘Get dressed,’ the man repeated.

‘You’re going on a journey,’ the other said. He was scooping up Benny’s novel. He’d found the emergency beacon under the pillow and had already dropped it into a bag.

‘Where’s Makins?’ Benny demanded.

Flynn was pulling on her underwear, trying to keep the robe on as she did it. The nearest goon was leering at her.

‘At least give us some privacy,’ Benny requested.

‘No,’ came the simple reply.

Flynn, with some difficulty, had managed to get a shirt on. The guard had grabbed her arm almost as soon as it was in the sleeve. He pressed something to her neck, and Flynn collapsed. As he pulled back, Benny saw it was a syringe.

‘What the hell?’

The other man made a grab for her. Benny whirled round, and punched him in what the Victorians might have described as ‘the abdomen’. While he reacted to that, she took the syringe from his hand, let it fall and stepped on it, breaking it. Whatever had been in there, it smelt like paint stripper. The other man watched this for a moment, his gaze switching from his colleague, to Benny, to the

broken syringe.

‘Tell Makins that he’ll have to do more than send his goons. I want him to come down here personally.’

The goon she’d hit nodded, picked up the bedside lamp and smashed it down on Benny’s head. She was out cold before she hit the side of the bed, let alone the floor.

The ground was hard beneath Benny, the grass, though, was soft. Her head was throbbing in exactly the way it would had a goon recently smashed a bedside lamp into it.

It was a warm evening, perhaps a little humid. Benny could sense Flynn lying close by. Benny felt relaxed, her muscles – knotted and stressed for as long as she could remember – were now so loose, she wondered if there was something wrong with them.

She sat up and found Beardmore standing over her.

‘What the hell?’ She seemed to recall expressing the same sentiment just before she blacked out. Only she’d been inside, then.

‘I found out what Makins was planning,’ Beardmore told her. ‘Makins? Oh yes. Right...’ Benny mumbled. Flynn was still out for the count, and possibly for some time after that.

‘He didn’t want any evidence. He wanted to dump you in the jungle, let the sabretooths find you. I wasn’t going to let him do that.’

‘Thanks for saving us,’ Benny beamed.

‘Ah.’

‘Ah?’

‘Ah,’ Beardmore confirmed. ‘I didn’t manage to persuade him. He drugged me and dumped me here, too.’

Benny took a moment to reflect on this news.

‘Ah,’ she concluded.

‘He’s left me a rifle,’ Beardmore said, hefting it up. ‘Plenty of bullets. And they’ve given us a sporting chance – we’ve got a set of tools and other kit.’

Benny grimaced. ‘All metal and plastic, I suppose. That’s not help, Beardmore, that’s *bait*.’

Beardmore’s expression was a poker-faced model of restraint.

‘Do you have a plan?’ Benny asked. Because I have a suggestion: find Makins and shove that rifle up his arse.’

Beardmore’s face cracked into a smile. ‘Good thinking. I’ll certainly implement that, the first opportunity I get. Can you wake your friend? I’ll scout the immediate area while you get her up to speed.’

He stepped away, into the foliage. Benny shook Flynn awake and told her what she knew.

The sabretooths?’ Flynn asked, terrified.

‘Presumably there aren’t any around,’ Benny reassured her.

‘Otherwise, we’d be dead already.’

‘What do we do?’ Flynn asked. As she finished, Beardmore returned, looking calm.

‘We look for your evidence,’ Benny said. ‘Before, we caught a fish and found dead insects. We’ll be able to find more bits of robots and use the tools to examine them. The emergency signal has been sounding for days, now. We have a hope of survival.’

Beardmore helped Flynn up. ‘We might not need to wait that long. When the hunters realise I’ve gone, they’ll come looking. If we get back to the ship, and we can signal to it, then they’ll listen to me, not him.’

This time, survival in the jungle involved none of the naive bumbling that Benny, Flynn and Johannsen had indulged in when they’d first landed on the planet. Oddly, Beardmore was treating Benny as the leader of their party and only offered suggestions and recommendations. Benny, of course, accepted every single one of them.

First, they didn’t have any sense of panic this time. They found a spot near a river, one with a good view of the surrounding jungle. Beardmore knew survival techniques, and how to avoid animal attacks. He knew how to conceal the metals and plastics.

‘The same way you’d conceal food from the animals on a *normal* planet,’ he growled.

Beardmore strung up lines between the trees, attaching small bells he carried with him. If a large animal came past, the bell would ring.

‘Are you feeling all right?’ Benny asked him. Barely a day ago, he’d almost died. His movements were more stiff than she remembered.

‘Fully recovered,’ he told her curtly, enough to confirm her suspicions that he wasn’t.

‘What does Flynn need?’ he asked.

‘A close-up look at a couple of different types of animal,’ Flynn replied for herself, coming over. They began sorting through what had been left for them. Rations and basic survival gear. One of the primitive handheld computers – its memory wiped clean.

‘Makins was exceptionally helpful,’ Benny noted, suspiciously. ‘You can analyse their components without a database?’

Flynn shrugged. ‘Analyse, no. But I can recognise them.’

There were other things – Benny’s novel and bikini, odd bits of climbing gear and items Benny couldn’t identify. The emergency beacon. The toolkit Beardmore had mentioned was small, but was likely to prove useful.

There was a brief lull in the conversation. On the other side of the water, they could hear the plants swooshing as some animal, or

perhaps a herd or pack of them, made their way past.

‘They’re after us,’ Flynn said.

‘No,’ Beardmore said.

‘How can you be sure?’

Benny gave a little laugh. ‘He can’t be sure.’

‘No, I can’t. But if the two of you are right, and there’s an ecosystem here, then it doesn’t include us. The carnivores will be too busy trying to track down herbivores that they know are out there, not human beings that they can’t be sure will be.’

‘The sabretooths were designed to kill people,’ Flynn said.

‘Yes, but they’ll be extremely good at killing herbivores, too. And we might have metal and plastics with us... but nothing like as many as a giant herbivore.’

‘We have advanced technology.’

‘We don’t, as it happens. Makins was always careful to make sure we only used low tech, and that’s all we’ve been given now. The only new technology came from your ship.’

‘Do the sabretooths know that?’ Flynn asked nervously.

‘We’ll find out,’ Beardmore laughed.

Benny was smiling to herself. ‘Does this mean that you believe our theory, now?’

Beardmore shrugged. ‘It fits the evidence. And I’m disinclined to believe Makins, now. I would like you to prove what you say.’

The next morning, after little sleep – after all, they had just spent several hours knocked out – they set out with a plan of action.

There were plenty of smaller animals, and these were easy to handle. The fish Benny and Johannsen had caught just after they’d crashed had been easy enough to acquire, and it would be full of components they could examine. Flynn was most interested in the software the robot was running. By now, the three of them had seen plenty of hardware – even if a lot of their observations had been made as they were dashing away from it. Beardmore had seen dead and captured robots up close. They’d all had the opportunity to see the mechanics of the animals, and their inner workings. But they had no idea what programs were running. They understood how the robots’ bodies worked, but not their minds.

The three of them stuck together. The plan was that Beardmore and Benny would try to catch a fish, Flynn would prepare the handheld computer. The day started with a couple of frustrating hours. The fish weren’t biting. First time round, the way Benny recalled it, at least, they’d just laid down a backpack and a fish had swum into it. This wasn’t the same river though – as far as they knew – and it could have been entirely devoid of life.

Benny and Beardmore continued to work on the problem, sitting on the bank and discussing better fishing strategies.

Flynn was programming the handheld computer, and it was slow going. Were Benny to draw a pie chart of how the young woman was spending her time, the biggest slice by far would be dedicated to waiting for the computer to catch up – or indeed rebooting it when it crashed; the second largest slice consisted of Flynn swearing about how crap the computer was; the third, and smallest slice would be Flynn happily tapping things into the computer.

Benny dug her hand into the loose mud, and something came away. She held it up. ‘A bone.’ she said.

Beardmore came over. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. My job involves identifying bones. This is... this looks like a fish bone. A jawbone.’

If this was Earth, she’d say it belonged to a trout. It wasn’t an exact match, of course. This creature’s teeth were more like bristles than teeth. It might not even have been a fish – it could have been a mammal, a reptile or any of the thousands of exotic classes that had been found on life-bearing planets with no terrestrial equivalent. To Benny, at least, one jawbone wasn’t enough to tell.

‘We’ve not seen any animal life on the planet,’ Beardmore said, staring hard at the bone.

‘You weren’t looking,’ Benny reminded him.

Beardmore held out his hand and after a moment’s consideration, Benny passed it over to him.

About two and a quarter hours after they laid down their net, a notably stupid robot fish managed to get caught in it.

Benny and Beardmore quickly pulled the net up, and – after a moment where it looked like it would wriggle free – they had the robot down on the bank. It flopped about in the grass. Flynn ran over with her computer. Beardmore kept watch as the two women opened up the fish’s head and connected it up to the handheld.

The fish was identical in every detail to the one they’d caught before. This time, Benny didn’t feel sorry for it, and she didn’t pause to appreciate its beauty.

‘Uploading,’ Flynn said, triumphant.

‘You can read the code?’

‘Yeah. Wow. It’s slow. Any idea what a modem is? The robot’s trying to find one.’

Benny frowned. ‘Well, it’s an archaic term. It’s a computer thing. Something to do with the internet.’

Flynn looked up at her. ‘Isn’t that what the Vikings used instead of the datanet?’

‘Something like that.’

‘And what’s an unasa?’

‘A what?’ Benny peered over at the screen. ‘Unasa... unasa. Well, it’s obviously not an asa. The opposite of an asa. An asa being... er... what’s the context here?’

‘I’m looking at source code, and there are various rems in there. Notes in English for anyone looking at the code. This is really weird’ She handed Benny the computer. New lines of data were scrolling up and onto the screen as it continued to download the program. The letters and numbers meant nothing to Benny, and some parts of the notation looked like mathematical symbols. Just ones an archaeologist wouldn’t know about.

Beardmore was looking over. ‘What have you discovered?’

‘I haven’t really discovered anything, yet,’ Flynn admitted.

‘It’s done scrolling,’ Benny announced.

‘Already?’

Benny bent over the fish. Its camera eye was staring up at her. ‘We could throw it back,’ she suggested.

Beardmore shook his head. ‘One less robot to worry about.’ Benny didn’t feel threatened by a fish. But then again, she didn’t know for sure it couldn’t just transform itself into a wolf or worse. Flynn was sitting back, reading the code. ‘This is pretty simple stuff,’ she said. ‘A little too simple to understand, at the moment.’

Benny wondered what Flynn was trying to find. She had no idea how to go about this search. She tried to think about it archaeologically. Take the known, take the context, isolate what was known and understood from what was known and not understood.

Beardmore was looking around, warily, with binoculars. ‘We’re at risk of attracting attention. There’s a pack of carnivores downwind. They haven’t seen us, yet, but they will.’

Benny took a look. They were wolves, not sabretooths, but there were half a dozen of them, and they’d proved lethal in the past. She nodded, and the three of them moved out.

‘It’s not artificial intelligence,’ Flynn said. She’d put the handheld away, and had decided to think about the problem, rather than just stare at the code.

The three of them were picking their way through the jungle. Beardmore’s experience was more than enough to outwit the wolves. They’d eluded the first pack and, from time to time, they’d spot more packs of them. But their binoculars had clearly got better range than the wolves’ cameras. The wolves continued on their way, oblivious to the meaty humans close by.

‘They’re not sentient?’ Benny remembered that there had been a

time, not that long ago, when that had been the most important thing she and Flynn had to establish.

‘The fish isn’t,’ Flynn said quickly. She wasn’t willing to give up on her pet theory just yet.

‘So it’s just a program?’ Beardmore said, trying to contain his sense of triumph. He had, after all, spent the whole time saying that the robots were mere toys.

‘It’s not like a... a washing machine,’ Flynn said. ‘It’s not that they follow strict sets of instruction. It’s more like they have guidelines. It’s a strange way to program a robot.’

Benny was puzzled. ‘Guidelines to do what?’

Flynn shrugged. ‘I haven’t worked that out yet.’

To survive,’ Benny suggested. ‘To adapt.’

‘Yes. There’s something else, though. I’ll get there, don’t worry.’

Beardmore had, for some time, been trying to get his bearings. There was a compass in the survival kit. He didn’t think they were far from the hunters’ ship but, when asked, he could only be sure they were within a thousand miles or so. He was also slowing down as the day wore on. His injuries weren’t fully healed.

Now he stumbled over a tree root, and although he got up, he looked like a frail old man as he did so.

Benny ordered them all to rest, aware that she shouldn’t antagonise Beardmore by singling him out. At the same time, the last thing they needed out here was to hide problems from each other.

There were some giant herbivores grazing nearby. They were easy enough to hear. They were probably a mile off, slightly to the right of the direction they were travelling in. The presence of the herbivores meant it was likely that there were wolves (or worse) lurking in the area.

There was also a noticeable increase in the number of insects. Confounding Benny’s view of him as a sick man, Beardmore just reached out and plucked one from the air.

It deactivated after less than a minute in his balled hand.

‘Solar powered,’ Benny reminded them.

Beardmore opened his fingers. The insect was beautiful, so tiny and intricate. It was difficult to believe that this wasn’t the work of a designer. The thorax was gold and what looked like inlaid silver. Like the insides of a clockwork pocket watch, everything about this insect was there for a reason. It looked elegant, even elaborate, but it would have been a model of efficiency.

Its wings started to buzz and it flew off, a few seconds in the light all it needed to recharge its power cells.

Flynn had spent the time reviewing the data on her computer. ‘It’s like Sanskrit,’ she said.

‘I can read Sanskrit,’ Benny assured her.

‘It’s the computer equivalent.’ Flynn said. ‘Not actual Sanskrit.’

‘Wouldn’t Bantu use the latest software?’ Beardmore asked.

‘You’d think so,’ Benny confirmed. ‘Especially on their state of the art robots.’

‘This isn’t state of the art,’ Flynn said. ‘It’s primitive. Elegant, in its way. I mean, computer memory used to be finite, and the early generations of computers found all sorts of ingenious ways to deal with that.’

‘They?’ Beardmore asked.

‘People in the olden days.’

‘Like the twenty-first century?’ Benny said.

Flynn nodded.

Flynn had said it. She’d said it earlier.

‘Like 2040?’ Benny asked.

‘Why 2040?’ Beardmore asked.

‘Because it isn’t unasa, it’s UNASA. It’s the United Nations Aeronautics and Space Administration,’ Benny told them. ‘And these robots weren’t built by Bantu. They’ve got nothing to do with Bantu. They were built by the Eagle probe.’

In da Gadda da Vida

‘The Eagle probe was a robot with an early artificial intelligence. This was long before other solar systems had been mapped in any detail. Long before telescopes could even directly observe Earth-like planets. The probes were just sent off into the void.’

It was about three minutes since Beardmore had been told the reason Benny had brought the *Sataspes* to this system. Benny felt elated. She’d found what she’d been looking for. Admittedly, not in the form she’d expected, but it was here.

‘One thing the probes would do, once they’d landed was send out scouts and extract natural resources. They could mine, they could drill for fuel and water. The computer database would contain a whole catalogue of rovers and prospectors that it could build using parts it had or could easily nanofacture. It would choose the ones it needed depending what it found on the planet.’

‘It was a robot factory?’ Flynn said.

‘No... more of a chemistry set. It was designed to survey the planet, then make it suitable for human life. Sometimes, that would be a matter of beginning to terraform, sometimes it would build a sealed habitat.’

‘Horses for courses,’ Beardmore nodded.

‘The probes were given a lot of leeway, and the designers programmed in all sorts of potential survival strategies. The idea was that the probe picked the best one for the circumstances.’

Flynn was thinking it through. ‘It picked the same strategy life did on Earth. Life forms competing, the strongest surviving, adapting and improving themselves. That covers the first of their directives, to survive.’

‘The other one was to make the planet habitable for humans, and prepare the way.’

Beardmore was looking around the jungle. ‘The planet was habitable already.’

‘Perhaps the robots built a colony, then ate it when the humans didn’t show up,’ Benny speculated.

‘It would be an important place to them,’ Flynn said.

‘The Garden of Eden,’ Benny agreed. ‘Is the location recorded in the fish’s software?’

Flynn began to take a look. ‘The new versions of the software only add to the program, they don’t over-write it. Everything’s in there somewhere.’

‘Wait,’ Beardmore said. The three of them dropped, hiding behind the nearest trees.

Three Bantu men in body armour were moving through the undergrowth.

‘What’s going on?’ Benny asked.

‘I don’t know. Makins brought about a dozen people with him. Support staff and a handful of security men.’

The three men were graceless, almost blundering around. They had powerful-looking magnetic bolt guns. Benny’s group circled around, until they were directly behind the three men.

Beardmore was rubbing his chin. ‘My men might have refused to move out until they knew more about the sabretooths. Or these guys could be looking for something they didn’t want my men to know about.’

‘Us?’ Benny suggested.

‘Possibly. If they wanted to kill us, why not just kill us in the ship, though?’

‘Three of us, three of them,’ Benny said. ‘I think we should take them.’

Flynn and Beardmore looked over at her, mouths open. Flynn looked a lot younger, Beardmore a lot older suddenly.

‘They don’t know we’re here,’ Benny said. ‘And they don’t understand the jungle.’

‘Yes, but they have assault rifles and body armour.’

There was a flash of fire, and one of the Bantu men was thrown backwards, right over their heads.

The other two guards began blasting away, hurling hundreds of rounds of bolts into the jungle, lacerating the trees. It was only when she established she hadn’t been torn apart that Benny worked out that they were firing in the opposite direction to her position.

Benny headed to the fallen man. He was dead, a hole in his chest barely smaller than the chest itself. The body armour had been irrelevant. The hole glistened with blood; around it, the body was intact. The helmet, the belt, the gun, the boots. All as good as new. The visor meant she didn’t have to look at his face.

Benny unclipped the belt and put it on, and picked up the gun. Back behind her, another energy bolt hit the ground, throwing up dirt, and making the two guards choke and scatter.

The thing firing the energy bolts broke cover.

It was a herbivore, smaller than the giant ones, but still the size of a truck. It crashed forwards on great bulldozer legs. It was covered in thick solar panels. The creature had a vast triangular skull, with a cannon welded to its top, held steady with metal struts. It had a trunk, which was probing the ground, sucking up rock from the blast crater.

Beardmore and Flynn had vanished.

The two guards had taken up new positions, both aiming their assault rifles at the creature. They fired, and Benny winced, but the bolts just glanced off the robot's side. It turned its head, melted another one of the guards, and continued to munch at the rocks in front of it.

The last guard stood, turned to flee and found himself facing Beardmore.

The hunter punched him out, his fist cracking the guard's visor. The guard slumped.

'Idiots,' Beardmore said. 'Amateurs. It's a herbivore. It wasn't threatening them.'

'That's the laser cannon from the *Sataspes*,' Flynn said.

The animal continued to eat the rocks. Every so often, it would stop to blast another hole in the ground.

'It uses it to loosen the soil, then it processes the rocks, just like the other herbivores,' Benny said. 'The weapon is no use to the carnivores – it would just disintegrate their prey, leave nothing to salvage.'

'It's another animal that's evolved in the last week,' Flynn pointed out. 'It's following its programming, using whatever materials it finds.' The cannon was smashed,' Benny noted.

'Then we know for a fact that the robots don't just steal components, they have the ability to make blueprints and build from them.'

The robot trudged towards them. Benny felt strangely calm. It was heading their way, not for them.

Beardmore was grabbing the other two assault rifles. 'Quick – it's coming to process the corpses. Take anything you think might be useful.'

He was doing what Benny had done – unclipping the belt, then quickly discarding it, when he saw it had all but melted. Flynn joined in the salvage.

The armed herbivore reached the first corpse, used its trunk to get the body armour loose. When it realised it couldn't fit the pieces into its trunk, it moved forward, stomping on the jacket until it had made more manageable pieces.

Benny and her colleagues left the area shortly after that.

The belt Benny had salvaged contained a bonanza – a radio, some sort of tracking device with an electronic map and, best of all, a small box she couldn't identify at first.

This, Beardmore quickly confirmed, was a signal device for the three men's aircar. He pointed it up at the sky and operated the control and, thirty seconds later, the aircar swooped down and parked

right in front of him. The entire process was automatic.

The three of them bundled inside. Benny took the controls, realising she was the only one of them who wasn't so tired they were about to pass out. Flynn was able to patch her handheld to the aircar's computer. The aircar's hardware was far more modern.

The handhelds are about what they had in 2040,' Flynn said.

'Makins knew,' Benny said levelly. 'He knew. That's why the hunters weren't allowed advanced tech – he knew the robots would absorb anything more advanced than was around when the Eagle probe was built and use it to upgrade.'

They'd taken the aircar up to about four thousand feet. It was low enough to make out all but the smallest details on the ground. They were, according to the navigation system, about seven hundred miles from the hunters' ship. They could be there in an hour, at full speed. They discussed strategy. It would be possible to go back, Beardmore could try to persuade his fellow hunters what had gone on. It seemed like a risk. A return, as Benny put it, to the lions' den. They had weapons, an aircar, a map and information. There ought to be a better way to use these new-found resources.

That way became obvious ten minutes later, when Flynn uncovered the location of the robot's Garden of Eden.

It was around two thousand three hundred miles away, but if they flew directly there, they'd pass into the detection area of the hunters' ship. So, the final tally was more like three thousand miles. It was going to take over four hours to get there, a little longer if the weather forecast was right and they were heading into storms.

Beardmore and Flynn were asleep before they were more than a hundred miles away. Benny had to keep awake – engaging the auto pilot would automatically notify the hunters' ship of their location. As it was, Beardmore had assured her that they couldn't track them – and even if they could, as the aircars all travelled at the same speed, it would also be very unlucky if the hunters had anything that could intercept them. There was a cruise control, though, so Benny had very few buttons to press.

It was a quiet time for Benny, then. The aircar shot through the air, over one of the oceans. Deep under the flat expanse of water, Benny thought she could see vast, dark shapes moving. Robot whales or giant squid? Schools of robot fish? Maybe just tricks of the light or reflected clouds.

The aircar controls remained steady and reassuring. Flying along like this felt like a normal thing to do after all that running around being chased and shot at. It didn't matter that Benny rarely drove, and it was all too common for some killer robot to come after her, or that

below her were millions of robots who'd kill her for the metal in her belt buckle. Driving an aircar was a sensible, everyday thing to be doing.

An hour later, she saw the storm front. She almost woke Flynn for it – the sky was a gunmetal wall of cloud. Inside, it flashed with electricity. Benny increased the aircar's shielding, and kept it low, barely five hundred feet. The terrain here was level grass plain.

Then she saw the animals. Herbivores, this time more like giraffes, with box girder necks longer than any twentieth-century construction cranes. The bodies were large and splayed, to anchor them. They were so tall, she had to pilot a course between them.

As Benny watched, a forest of cranes lifted themselves, and swung up to face the storm. It was only then that she understood how this particular herbivore collected its energy.

Lightning bolts rained down, hitting the cranes, charging them up. The forest of cranes crackled as each bolt hit, some spidery arcs passed from crane to crane. There were about a hundred giraffes, each of them drinking deep from the storm. Within a few minutes, the aircar had passed them, and was heading for blue skies.

Both Beardmore and Flynn had woken up about half an hour before the aircar was due at the Garden of Eden.

Beardmore was looking a lot stronger for his rest, but Benny had to remind herself that he was an injured man. Flynn was back to her old self. A few hours safe from the robots and at least partially in control of her own destiny had helped her state of mind enormously.

'What are we looking for?' Beardmore asked.

'Standard for an early colony was fairly basic,' Benny said, dredging up the information from some part of her studies. 'Habitation area usually a sealed dome, or an underground complex. Generator – usually solar, wind or tidal, depending on the local conditions. I'm guessing solar on this planet. Farm – a greenhouse or tended fields. Reservoir – some way of collecting water. Mine – some sort of way of extracting minerals. Communications – a radio mast or dish. Landing pad. The exact layout and size of the colony depends on the planet, but it's small. The whole point is to prepare the way, not do all the work.'

'Defences?'

'Unlikely.'

'Specifically ground-to-air defences?'

'Extremely unlikely. Any probe that encountered a hostile solar system would go into reconnaissance mode. It would map the system, with special reference to military deployments. It would report back to Earth. Luckily, they weren't programmed to take aggressive action.'

Flynn shrugged. 'Seems to me that they could have caused some serious damage to our enemies.'

'They'd have declared war on behalf of the whole human race in a hundred systems that Earth didn't even know were inhabited. Rather than do that, they tended to self-destruct if detected or captured.'

The navigation computer was chiming at them.

'We've got something,' Benny said. 'Bearing a little to the left. I mean to *port*.'

The aircar came to land on a small concrete platform.

The colony had been built on the side of a mountain. They had hovered over it in the aircar for five or six minutes, trying to establish the lie of the land. Benny's expert eye had concluded that the robots built by the probe had levelled existing natural terraces and plateaux, extended caves. There were about a dozen terraces, at different levels, around a thousand feet above sea level. The smallest was the landing pad – a lot of larger, modern spaceships would have trouble, although it could comfortably fit half a dozen the size of the *Sataspes* or a score of aircars.

There were six terraces under glass domes. Greenhouses. The glass was frosted, but even through that it could be seen that every dome was full of green foliage.

The terrace with the living area was surprisingly small. Probably only big enough for a few dozen people to live in. It probably extended back into the mountain itself.

There was a solar farm running down the mountain, a flat black slope. There was no evidence of a radio mast. The various terraces were all linked by narrow covered walkways. It was all very pleasant, if a little old-fashioned. There was a distinct African influence in the slope of the roofs of the various buildings, but little in the way of decoration or ornamentation. It must have looked impossibly futuristic in 2040.

As the aircar landed, lights on the pad snapped on to guide their way to the habitation terrace.

'There may be people here,' Flynn said.

'It's probably automated.' But Beardmore was getting the bolt gun ready.

'We don't want to appear antagonistic. Flynn is there some sort of password, or authorisation code or something?'

Flynn flicked through the program on the handheld. 'There's no code that I can see.'

Beardmore hesitated. 'This was prepared for colonists. When the astronauts arrived, there must have been something they had to do to say hello.'

There were legends of shipwrecked astronauts arriving on planets controlled by probes and finding fully stocked bases which the robots wouldn't let them enter because the marooned men hadn't got the correct password. Nonsense, of course, a variation on the old 'water, water everywhere' routine, with all the essential ironies of an astral myth. The other element of a myth like that was that it tapped into a greater truth. It was possible, because robots tended to default to literal-mindedness. And if Beardmore could believe Benny brought him luck, he could believe in men starving to death while the robots guarding silos full of food watched on.

'We could knock on the door and say "hi",' Benny said.

So they did. Beardmore brought his bolt gun, but kept it clipped to his belt. Flynn brought the handheld, in case any computer-tocomputer negotiations proved necessary. Benny just brought herself.

They walked across the landing pad, a little warily. A robot bird about the size of a pelican was perched on the edge of the terrace, apparently watching them. Lazily, it lifted off and flapped away as they got nearer. The walkway was wide enough for two of them to stand shoulder to shoulder. Beardmore brought up the rear, watching things carefully, expecting trouble.

They reached the second terrace. The door to the habitation module was quite small, and looked fairly lightweight. There was no obvious door control or handle.

Benny reached out to knock on it, and the door slid smoothly up.

They stepped in.

The room was like any new house – bare, but clean and functional. A blank canvas, rather than a masterpiece. The walls were painted very slightly off-white. There was no furniture, the shelves were empty, the floor was flat. There was a fireplace, in the centre of the room. There was the faint hum of an air conditioner, and it was noticeably cooler in here than outside. A panoramic window gave a magnificent view down the mountain and over the grassy foothills. The glass must be polarised – from the outside, this window looked like bare wall. The room was flooded with daylight.

This was meant to be an area for the whole group – a lounge, a common room, an officer's mess, depending on who the colonists were. It was all very nicely proportioned and welcoming. Benny was already mentally sizing it up for curtains and carpets. This was clearly what the architect wanted the colonists to do. After all those light years, this was to be their new home.

There was a large kitchen and refectory adjacent to this room. The kitchen had a variety of things to cook on – big electric, microwave and ultrasonic ovens, a range, some sort of deep fat fryer, kettles and what could have been bread makers. There were a couple of cold

storage rooms (neither of which had been turned on). There was plenty of storage space and counters and sinks.

Flynn found a master control panel for the room, one that would turn the power and water on. They refrained from activating it, just yet.

There were twenty identical rooms that would serve as double or twin bedrooms. There were four toilet cubicles and two shower rooms. There were various spaces with the potential to be storerooms, a gym, a library... whatever the colonists wanted.

So far, so bare. The last room they found was the only point of serious interest, and that was mainly because they couldn't get into it.

Here, for the first time, was a locked door. There was a control panel, with a colourful row of buttons, none of them marked. Benny refrained from pressing any of them.

'Flynn?'

The young woman had a quick look, then started to examine the panel more carefully.

'I should be able to bypass the controls through my handheld.' Benny shook her head. 'We've got other things to explore.'

These were the Farm domes. The nearest was right across (and down a little) from the terrace with the living quarters. The three of them made their way down there, Beardmore leading the way this time.

The dome was frosted glass, probably some clever pattern that filtered and diffused the sunlight. There was a small airlock-type arrangement to keep the heat in.

Stepping into it was literally to step into another world.

The air smelt like Earth – like the temperate farmlands there, anyway. The dome was the size of a small field, and laid out in neat soil beds. It was warm and moist in here. There were concrete benches, and a central fountain, which indicated that the place would double up as a recreation area.

Tiny oblong robots were tending the crops, which were mostly herbs, fruit and root vegetables. Further inspection showed that there were three segments to the garden, and the plants were in different stages of development. It had been set up to provide three crops a year, at least.

One robot was picking strawberries. The robot was about the size and shape of a tortoise. It had a pair of thin articulated feelers which it used to remove the produce from the soil, and a solar panel and small hopper on its back. Benny lifted one fruit it had plucked and munched at it.

'Delicious,' she informed the others.

'It's a real strawberry?' Beardmore asked.

‘Rather than a robot one?’ Benny laughed. ‘Yes. The original probe would have had seeds and pods onboard to plant crops. The planet is clearly very fertile. On some worlds, the colonists would have been forced to eat algae and fungi, if that’s all the soil could sustain.’

Beardmore was stroking his chin. ‘A plate of fried mushrooms? It’s been a long time.’

Flynn was more interested in the robot. ‘It’s primitive compared with the animals outside.’

‘It does its job,’ Beardmore said.

‘It does its job very well,’ Flynn pointed out. ‘This place is beautiful.’ Benny was looking at the robot. ‘The original herbivore,’ she said. Beardmore peered down. ‘Why... you’re right. It’s basically the same configuration as the giant herbivores. Only those are the size of this dome.’

‘We’re evolved from something that looked like a shrew,’ Benny reminded them. ‘So are all the mammals, all the way up to elephants and whales. There was an evolutionary advantage for us to get larger.’

The tiny harvesting robot looked almost brand new. It kept itself clean and well-maintained.

‘Some must have got out by mistake. Beyond the dome, a smaller creature would be vulnerable, so as it repaired itself, it added armour and bulk.’

‘There are clearly still enough robots to maintain the place. There must be a factory somewhere that replaces broken or escaped units.’

The tiny robot was making its way neatly around a strawberry plant, scanning each berry, performing a calculation, then either plucking it or leaving it be. Watching it and its dozen or so cohorts bumble about their business was quite relaxing.

Benny wondered if there was a thesis in it. How much of the earliest colonists’ time had been spent just sitting around looking at robots going about their routines?

‘Tool cleaner,’ said Flynn, unaccountably. She was at the fountain. Two fish robots, smaller but almost identical to the ones they had caught, were flitting around the bottom of the fountain, nibbling away at the concrete, presumably removing any dirt or algae in there. ‘Harder to see how they got out,’ Flynn said.

Beardmore was peering into the pool. ‘The water comes from somewhere. Didn’t you say something about a reservoir, Benny? My guess is that it’s got cleaners, too and it isn’t so well sealed off.’

The harvester robots were piling up the food in special crates at one side of the dome. Where appropriate, these were cooled by running water. Two robots were running around the crates, sorting the vegetables, throwing the rotten ones out into another big crate. Periodically, the bottom of the crate would open, and the food would

tumble out, down the mountainside.

'I think we've found the escape route for the land robots,' Benny said.

'What a waste,' Flynn said. 'They've been here for centuries, planting and tending and harvesting. Then it just gets thrown away.'

Benny and Beardmore couldn't do anything but agree. The three of them picked out fruit and Beardmore let them store it in his hat, on the condition Flynn carried it. Benny put some of the carrots, yams and parsnips in her backpack, with the vague idea of making some sort of mash later. For the moment, she took soft fruit.

The next Farm dome was full of trees and other large plants like bamboo.

This was more humid, and more overgrown. There were fruit trees here, streams of warm water circulating around their roots. Benny found it extremely pleasant. Flynn and Beardmore looked bored.

'You go onto the next one,' she suggested. They did, much to her relief.

Finally, some time alone.

She sat at the base of a tree, breathing in the air. There were birds here. Tiny sparrow robots that pruned the trees. The tops couldn't be allowed to touch the roof of the dome. The leaf canopy could never be allowed to block out the sunlight for the smaller plants at the base, and if the trees got too big, they'd threaten the structure of the building.

The fruit trees would provide food, but the main function must be to produce wood for furniture and fencing. These all looked like fast-growing or evergreen trees. She wasn't a treeologist, or whatever an expert on trees was called, but she could smell pine. There were also bushes here – again, they'd provide fruit and would make good hedgerows.

Another person, she realised, might see it as just trees.

This wasn't getting back to nature. This was about as artificial an environment as it was possible to have. The trees had evolved hundreds of light years away, and been nurtured here by a computerised intelligence.

Every other time in her life, she'd taken it all for granted.

All of it. The plants and animals had been around as long as humanity, longer, but Benny had been brought up with the human race trampling around space, flying between the stars, planting flags in alien soil, either building cities and spaceports like the ones on Petuaria or great quarries or farms. Strip mining or strip malls, humanity's great gift to the face of the galaxy.

When the Eagle had been launched, Chang Hu and his crew had

barely made it to the Kuiper Belt, and hadn't been sure quite what they would find until they got there. Benny's life, what was utterly mundane to her, would have been the stuff of dreams. Many people had died so that she could be here today. The people who had designed and built the Eagle probe had set something on its way, knowing it would be many centuries, but that one day human beings would come here. The Eagle had prepared this place for human life, long before even her great-great-grandparents had been born.

She was the first to come here and admire the handiwork. It wouldn't be the basis for a new colony, not now. And that seemed a shame. All this work, unnoticed and for nothing.

On an impulse, she stripped off and slipped into the warm water, immersing herself. It was only five feet deep, so barely came up to her chest when she was standing up.

She made her first tentative strokes. It was colder than a bath, but warm as a spring day. It was perfect.

Benny stepped out, naked, and walked around, letting the warm air dry her.

The Garden of Eden. For her, anyway. She felt beautiful, and new. Robot birds flew above her, on some mission to preserve this place, allow it to continue to be.

No-one was watching her, nothing in the universe knew what she was doing. She didn't want anyone else here. Nothing that was meant to be important seemed that important any more.

Beardmore and Flynn would be back soon.

She took one last look up at the trees and the birds and the sunlight filtered to perfection above her, then walked back to where she had swum from and got dressed. She didn't look back as she went to find the others.

Flynn and Beardmore were sat in the middle of the next Farm dome, one with some fast-growing cereal crop. Shrew-like robots ran from corn ear to corn ear, checking for parasites and fungus.

Flynn was working on her handheld. The two looked relaxed together. Benny couldn't imagine a single thing they had in common. They literally came from different worlds.

'I think I've found the entry code for that door in the hab terrace,' Flynn announced.

Beardmore was lying back, a straw in his mouth. 'We wanted to wait for you before going back and opening it.'

Benny was looking around this latest dome. The crops were golden and luxuriant, perfectly still in this breezeless, perfectly-regulated environment.

'You can see it growing if you sit long enough,' Beardmore said,

with some authority.

Reluctantly, they headed back to the locked door.

Flynn gave Benny the code, and the archaeologist tapped it into the control panel carefully. The door whooshed open to reveal a darkened control room, the back wall laid out with dozens of 2D monitor screens.

All of them showed scenes from the surface of the planet, all of which were changing every second or so.

Grassland, water, the air, the jungle, the mountains. An endless cycle of television pictures.

'Images from all over the planet,' Benny said. There were landscapes they hadn't seen. Snowbound wastes, an active lava pit, pictures beaming in from underwater and high in the sky.

'I didn't see any cameras,' Flynn said.

'You did,' Beardmore replied. 'Every single animal has at least two of them.'

Flynn had sat down at a control desk in the middle of the room. There was a microphone, but no controls.

'Voice activated?' she wondered.

Benny was circling the desk. The shape looked familiar. She tapped at an access panel and it came away. Inside was a very, very old computer.

'Mr Eagle probe, I presume,' she said to it.

'The CPU, anyway,' Flynn said, joining her. 'The robot factory bit must be somewhere else.'

'We've not explored the entire complex,' Beardmore agreed. He'd sat himself down, and was examining the screens.

'World Map,' he said, finally. It took Benny a moment to realise he wasn't talking to her or Flynn.

The central screens changed, showing a simple map of the planet. 'Options,' he said.

'Be careful,' Benny warned.

The screen flickered with various menus and keywords. It could show the location of every animal, it could give a weather map, it could zoom down to specific areas.

'Can we control the animals?' Flynn asked.

'Takes the fun out of hunting,' Beardmore noted. But it turned out that the escaped robots were autonomous, and completely outside the control of the Eagle. The video link to this place was a vestige of a time when they'd lived here, not some two-way process. Flynn noted that there might be plenty of animals who had evolved out of relaying pictures back here.

'Can we use it to locate your people?'

Beardmore shrugged. 'By trial and error, I think. We can look at the ship, because we know the grid reference.'

He reeled off the co-ordinates, and the picture changed to a literal bird's eye view of the hunters' ship, the curved shape hanging there just like it had been the first time Benny saw it.

The hangar bays are open again,' Beardmore said. 'Looks like they've resumed hunting.' He tried a few grid references, but couldn't find an animal who was looking at a hunter out in the field.

Flynn was looking over the Eagle probe. 'It looks relatively intact. It's not cannibalised itself.'

'The planet was rich in minerals. It didn't need to. It would have landed on the mountain, extracted the metals it needed to build the robots from there.'

'It may be possible to fit the various pieces together. Not perfectly intact, but near enough.'

Beardmore looked down at her. 'Why would you want to do that?'

'It's of archaeological interest,' Benny said carefully.

'Another one of those relative terms you mentioned before,' Beardmore noted dryly.

Benny was looking at the screens. 'That one's a fish, that one's a bird... is there some way of isolating the different creatures?'

Beardmore licked his lips. 'There will be, yes. A question of asking the right question.'

Benny moved round and leaned in to the microphone. 'List robot configurations.'

A set of meaningless serial numbers, apparently subdivided by type and then by further variations. There were several thousand.

'Hmmm...' Benny said, a little frustrated. Then: 'List in order of creation. Limit list to the last week.'

Twenty species.

A quick process of elimination – during which they found the armed herbivore, a type of fish that could bite through a net and a bird that didn't use wings but used antigravs – and they located the sabretooth. There were only thirty-five units of that type in operation.

Benny asked the computer to show the pictures from those thirty-five.

All of them could be shown at once. Benny was pleased with herself.

'Now we'll get some early warning.'

Flynn was looking at the screen. 'Er...'

Benny didn't like having her parade rained on. She thought she'd just been tremendously clever.

'What is it, Flynn?' she snapped.

'It's just... isn't that our aircar those three sabretooths are eating?'

10

Ambush

Beardmore fired a shot above their heads, but the sabretooths continued to attack the aircar.

They'd barely started. The three robots, working together, had pulled off one of the metal panels at the rear. Beardmore took careful aim, and dispatched one of the sabretooths with a metal bolt to the head. The other two turned and leapt. Beardmore ran back, managing to get another shot off, and into the shoulder of one of them. The door slid closed, and Benny heard the sabretooth slam into it like a car crash.

'Warm blooded,' Benny said.

'What?' Beardmore was reloading the gun.

'The door only opens for warm-blooded creatures. It's why there are no hostile robots in –'

The sabretooth's fangs punctured holes in the door, then dragged down, until there was a hole big enough for it to step through. It drew back, working its teeth loose from the metal door, then stepped forward, poking its head through the gap.

That had taken far longer than Beardmore needed to take aim. He fired a bolt right through the sabretooth's skull, the force of the shot practically ripping its head from its body.

The last sabretooth leapt over the wreckage and into the room, but landed awkwardly. This was the one with the damaged shoulder. Benny was already pulling Flynn through into the kitchen. Beardmore was behind them, reloading.

'Automatic fire?' Benny suggested.

'One well-aimed shot is worth twenty sprayed ones,' he sneered.

The sabretooth leapt right over him, heading for Benny. As it passed, though, Beardmore swung the gun up, blasted the beast in the chest. The force of the shot deflected it, sent it crashing onto one of the counters, smashed it.

The last sabretooth was dead.

Benny started breathing again and looked over at it. There wasn't much to look at – Beardmore had made sure it was little more than scrap. The body was shattered.

She frowned. 'You didn't hit its head, did you?'

There was a neat bullet hole just above one eye.

'No.' Beardmore was bent over it. 'That was done with a rifle bullet, not a bolt gun.'

'It's been patched,' Flynn said.

‘Makins.’ Benny concluded, already heading for the door.

‘Makins?’ Flynn echoed.

‘He reprogrammed the robots the hunters caught. Sent them here to get us. We have to get out of here.’

Once outside, they could hear aircars approaching. One swept into view, hovered over the landing pad. The other whooshed past at what must have been just under the speed of sound.

‘Down!’ Beardmore shouted, before swinging the bolt gun up and firing a couple of bursts towards the aircar that had stayed. This had the desired effect of making the aircar veer off and swiftly retreat until it was well out of range.

It was still in sight, a dot over the foothills. The other one had vanished.

A minute later, the one they could see was heading their way.

It’s on an attack run,’ Benny said.

Sure enough, it was swooping in, its front towards them, keeping its profile as small as possible and presenting a tiny target.

This way, though, the aircar wouldn’t be able to fire until the last minute. The vehicles didn’t have mounted weapons, the passenger had to lean out with a bolt gun. To do that effectively, it would have to point the passenger side towards them.

Beardmore tried firing at it, but it was moving too fast.

‘Flynn – inside,’ Benny ordered.

Flynn started to protest, but Benny ignored her, and instead grabbed Beardmore’s arm.

‘And you – into the aircar. I’ll fly, you fire.’

Flynn was darting back across the walkway to the habitation dome, Benny was on her way to the aircar, rummaging in her pocket for its ignition module. Beardmore followed, laying down covering fire. Benny was inside just as the Bantu aircar arrived. The passenger door was open, and a guard in the same black armour as before was aiming at her.

Beardmore fired, missing, but throwing off the man’s aim. The hunter jumped into the passenger seat beside Benny, gun still blazing.

Benny started the aircar, pushed it straight up. The landing pad where it had sat crackled and cracked as enemy fire hit it. Beardmore hadn’t quite sat down, and flailed around a little. At least he had the presence of mind not to let his gun go off.

‘What’s the plan?’ he shouted over the noise of the antigravs.

Benny was slowing their ascent. ‘Er... my plan ran out when we took off. It just struck me that we stood more chance if we were moving as fast as they were.’

Beardmore nodded. ‘He’s probably not a trained pilot, just a driver. Try to keep above them, but always keep them in sight.’

Benny had got used to the controls on the long drive over. Now, she pushed the engine harder, leaving a little power in reserve, in case she needed it. The aircar's performance hadn't suffered at all from being nibbled on by the sabretooths. She decided to give the other aircar a scare, heading straight up, then setting herself on a collision course, dive-bombing her opponent. Beardmore didn't do anything more than cling on for dear life.

The other aircar didn't see them coming. Benny passed so close it barely qualified as a near miss. Looking back, she saw the other aircar give a very satisfying wobble as the other driver panicked.

They pressed their advantage. Benny pulled back on the wheel, jammed her foot on the throttle and let the car's computer negotiate the differences between what she wanted to do and the laws of physics. Part of the deal with antigravs was that it was meant to keep the cabin at a steady 1G – the *Sataspes*, remember, had managed to exceed escape velocity without Benny even noticing – but now her neck was thrown back and her head was pushing back into her seat.

Beardmore was at the open door, and fired, once. Benny heard the bolt connect with what must have been the underside of the other aircar, but as they banked round, there was no obvious indication they'd done any serious damage.

They came powering in, along the driver's side.

Beardmore fired straight at the window. The bolt hit, and cracked the glass, but it was designed to be tough enough to stand high-speed impacts, and it held.

The driver banked around, twisting the aircar 180 degrees, so it was facing upside-down. The gunman rolled round to face them, feet first, secured in place. He fired his own bolt gun, but waited too long, and the shots went high over the roof.

Beardmore got a shot into the cabin, shattered a side window but didn't hit anything or anyone important. Benny pulled the car away, then banked around again, trying to get level with the driver's side of the enemy.

'That's no use,' Beardmore said. The only vulnerable point is the open door.'

'We're the same. If we expose your side to them ..'

'We're high up, try lowering altitude. Give them something else to worry about.'

Benny had thought about increasing altitude. With the enemy's windows damaged, they'd be at a disadvantage in higher, thinner air. But she saw the wisdom of Beardmore's suggestion. She pitched the plane down, dived for the mountains. Her view filled with dark grey, jagged rocks and it was difficult to fight her instinct to pull up. The car's artificial horizon display and emergency message centre was also

complaining.

A glance in the reverse viewer confirmed that the Bantu aircar was following them.

Ahead, Benny could make out the domes of the colony, which gave her some sense of direction and of her height and speed. She aimed the nose of the car there, and jammed her foot on the accelerator. The ground approached rather quickly, and she turned right at the last moment, levelling off and heading between two mountain peaks.

She had half-hoped the aircar would misjudge and dash itself against the rocks. Instead, it had gained ground, and now came up alongside her. Benny turned her head, and saw the gunman aiming at her.

Instead of diving away, she turned her car into her opponent's, ramming it. As she pulled away, the gunman lost his footing, and fell out of the door.

Benny swung round, allowing Beardmore a clear shot into the interior. He aimed at the controls, not the pilot. There were sparks and smoke as the controls overloaded.

She pressed on, increasing speed again. There was little reserve power, now. The aircar screamed along a mountain ridge, barely higher than the outcrops of rocks and vegetation. Her opponent was doing the same. Without a gunman, it was hard to see what he hoped to achieve, unless it was to force Benny to make a mistake.

She pulled up, practically a ninety degree turn upwards. A second or two later, she was up above the thin clouds. All sorts of warning lights were on, now This wasn't a stunt vehicle.

Beardmore was nodding, pleased with her progress.

Benny swung the aircar around, set it heading towards her opponent's. It was climbing more soberly, heading their way. She gunned her engine, and arrived at the aircar before it was expecting her. She swung around, actually clipping its side. Now they were at matched speeds and courses.

Beardmore fired into the cabin again. Multiple rounds, at least two of which hit the pilot, another two of which smashed into consoles.

The aircar dropped from the sky like a string had been cut. Beardmore had managed to disable the antigravs. The aircar now tumbled end over end. It was ten or fifteen seconds before they saw the explosion bloom on the side of the mountain.

'Head back,' Beardmore called. 'There was another aircar.'

Benny had almost forgotten it. But a minute later, as they arrived at the landing pad, it was there, carefully placed to avoid the damage to the concrete surface inflicted on it by its colleague.

'Flynn...' Benny breathed.

Beardmore snapped a new magazine to the bolt gun. Come on.'

They hit the ground running, Beardmore ahead.

The surviving Bantu aircar was empty. Beardmore cast his tracker's eye over it and told her that there had been three occupants, Benny was happy to agree with the estimate.

'They're not here for us,' Benny said. If they were, they'd have got this into the air to fight us, or chase us.'

Beardmore looked over to the habitation dome. 'They've come here to the base.'

'If they knew it was here, why hadn't they come here before?' Beardmore shook his head. 'They might have been tracking us somehow.'

There wasn't a guard posted. The door to the habitation dome was in tatters, thanks to the sabretooths. All three animals lay where they had fallen.

Benny hesitated at the doorway. 'We can't risk hitting Flynn,' she said.

'Agreed.'

A crash, a booming noise and a man screaming. It was coming from the kitchen.

There was a sabretooth there, but it was the dead one, the one Beardmore had shot in the chest. They confirmed it was deactivated, then moved over to the dead man.

He was a Bantu guard in body armour, and he'd been butchered. He'd clearly been the victim of a sabretooth. Beardmore looked over the body and quickly reconstructed what had happened.

'The animal jumped on his back, like they did in the forest. It tried to bite his neck, but the armour was too strong. The force of the impact broke his back, though, and he fell. The robot bit the man's gun in two, the explosion blew off the man's hand. The robot could get under the helmet, then, and stabbed his throat.'

There was no sign of the animal, but it couldn't be far.

The floor and walls were slick with blood.

'Something's not right,' Benny said.

Beardmore raised an eyebrow, pointing down at the man with a hand and half his neck missing.

'Not that,' she insisted. If Makins reprogrammed the robots to kill us, why did one kill his man? This must be the work of a wild sabretooth. But look at the kitchen.'

'It's exactly the same as we left it,' Beardmore said. A bit of a state, with a dead sabretooth embedded in one of the kitchen units.

'Exactly,' Benny said. 'Before, every carnivore has stopped to scavenge anything it can. Look at this – there's the kitchen, all that gear there. There's the guard and his gun. There's even another

sabretooth.'

'Perhaps we interrupted it,' Beardmore said, already aware that explanation didn't hold water.

'It would have stayed here to fight.'

'It didn't.'

'A change of tactics,' Benny said.

Beardmore scowled. 'I thought we knew these damn things by now.'

'They're designed to kill us. And we change tactics, so they change tactics.'

Beardmore froze, then moved his arm slightly.

He was signalling something, but it took Benny a moment to work out what. There was a set of animal tracks in blood, leading to the nearest freezer.

Benny jumped forwards, slammed the freezer door shut. It hissed as it sealed itself up. There was a clacking from one of the freezers. Metal feet on ceramic floor, building in pace.

There was a slam. Metal against metal.

'Can it get through?' Benny whispered.

There was a grinding, scraping noise from the other side of the door. Beardmore shrugged. 'Oh yes. I wouldn't wait around to see how long it takes.'

They barricaded the sabretooth in as best they could, by pulling out one of the cookers and edging it into place in front of the freezer door.

When they were finishing that, they realised shots were being fired from further inside the complex.

The control room,' Benny guessed. 'What do we do?'

'Find Flynn and get out of here,' Beardmore suggested.

They moved very cautiously. Benny told Beardmore that she guessed there was another Bantu man here, somewhere, presumably as well-armed and protected as the one who'd died. 'They always seem to work in pairs.'

Beardmore nodded. 'There's likely to be other sabretooths'

'How did the wild robots get up here?'

Beardmore smiled. 'Animals are pretty resourceful, and those sabretooths are agile. Ever heard of mountain lions?'

'I suppose there's also that link to the control room. If the probe can see through the sabretooths' eyes, then the sabretooths might have some sense of this place. Some sort of homing instinct. I mean... it's possible, isn't it?'

Beardmore shrugged. 'If they had a homing instinct, they'd never have strayed too far from the colony buildings in the first place.' They turned the last corner before the control room.

Then dived back round it as they were fired on. A bolt flew past and blew a chunk out of the opposite wall.

‘Makins!’ Beardmore bellowed. ‘Drop your weapon.’

‘You got a look at him?’ Benny whispered, amazed. She’d only got the vaguest sense of a person there.

‘It’s him,’ Beardmore confirmed.

‘See anything else?’ she asked.

‘I didn’t see Flynn.’

He reached the barrel of the bolt gun round the corner and fired a couple of times before pulling the gun back. He looked a little disappointed that he didn’t hear anyone slumping to the floor or crying out in pain.

‘Beardmore,’ Makins called out. ‘Brought your little friends with you?’

‘He’s not got Flynn,’ Benny noted. Beardmore nodded – he’d already worked that out for himself.

‘Thank you for leading me here,’ Makins called out. ‘That emergency beacon you’ve been carrying around makes for an excellent homing device, Professor Summerfield.’

‘He’s very chatty,’ Beardmore said.

‘Madmen usually are, in my experience,’ Benny said.

‘You found the original colony very easily. My men have been working on the problem since we got here. Capturing robots, trying to analyse their software to find their place of origin. You find it almost straight away. I thought you might. Between the three of you, you have all the talents you needed. That’s why I set you loose.’

‘You set us loose so that the sabretooths would kill us.’

‘No. Of course, if you failed, they would have done. It’s what we businessmen call a win-win scenario.’

There was still time for the sabretooths to get round to killing them. ‘You’re a very bright, very beautiful woman, Professor Summerfield. Such a pity you can’t count,’ Makins said.

‘What’s he mean?’ Benny began.

Beardmore’s leg burst open, and he fell to the ground, clutching it. Another Bantu guard had snuck up behind them and now aimed his gun square at Benny’s forehead.

‘At a guess,’ the guard said, ‘he means there were three of us.’

11

Hunted

‘It’s a simple choice, Professor Summerfield,’ Makins repeated. ‘You open this door, or this old man dies.’

He tapped Beardmore with his foot, carefully avoiding getting the blood on his shoes.

‘I can’t open the door,’ Benny said. ‘I don’t have the sequence. It’s in a handheld computer that I misplaced.’

‘You mean it’s with the girl, Flynn. Where is she?’

‘She was eaten by –’

‘We saw her on our flypast. She ran back into this building. Beardmore, you can save yourself, you know, you don’t have to wait for this woman to do it. That leg injury is easily treated.’

Beardmore swore at Makins.

‘Many reinforcements are on the way here,’ Makins said.

‘You don’t have “many” more men,’ Beardmore reminded him. ‘You had about a dozen people here, and half of them are dead, now. The rest of the crew of that ship are hunters.’

Benny was trying to calculate the odds. Makins was technically outnumbered – there was him and the surviving guard (who she recognised as one of the goons who’d thrown her and Flynn out of the hunters’ ship, the one who’d leered at Flynn). The guard was carrying a bolt gun, Makins had some sort of energy pistol in a belt holster. Benny was fit and healthy, if unarmed. Beardmore had a painful but not mortal wound and wasn’t far away from his dropped bolt gun. Flynn was – Benny had to assume she hadn’t been eaten by a sabretooth – around somewhere, not injured and possibly had one of the other bolt guns.

It didn’t feel to Benny like she was holding a winning hand, though. ‘Get me the other woman,’ Makins ordered Benny. ‘I want Flynn here, now.’

‘She might be behind that door,’ Benny said, quickly realising she might well be.

Makins looked over, curiously. ‘So you have opened it?’

Benny kept her mouth shut.

‘Is it the robot factory?’ he asked, almost greedily.

‘That’s what you came here for?’ Benny asked. ‘Bantu own hundreds of robot factories.’

‘Thousands,’ Makins said, casually. ‘But none quite like this.’

‘You think there’s a market for robot elephants?’ Benny spat.

‘For autonomous robot quarries that can be dropped on a planet and

adapt to individual circumstances? Of course there is.'

'And every home needs a sabretooth guarding it.'

'Once we've programmed in a few safety precautions. These robots are unique, Professor. Simple, elegant design. Very easy to repair since we arrived here, half the robots we thought we'd destroyed managed to repair themselves.'

Beardmore moaned. He must have been on the verge of passing out. 'You don't understand the processes involved.'

'Which is precisely why we've been rounding the robots up, and why we've been keen to find this facility. We barely know anything about them. This whole area of technology was abandoned when faster-than-light travel was discovered and it became cheap to send humans exploring.'

'This planet isn't Bantu property.'

Makins smiled. 'Our factory ship crashed, remember? A cover story that will hold water. It was actually one of our courier rockets that found the place. It drifted off course about six months ago and ended up here. It managed to get away, but not before reporting a planet of robot animals.'

Benny was bending over Beardmore, who was looking very pale. This was the second time in just a few days that he'd suffered trauma and blood loss, the second time she'd bent over him, hoping he wouldn't die.

She lent in.

'Painkillers,' he said softly.

'I'll get you help.'

'No, you stupid woman. I'm dosed up on them from last time. Get rid of the guard, I'll take out Makins'

Benny stood up. Beardmore slipped back, like he'd passed out. 'He's dead,' Benny said.

Makins' smile flickered.

Benny had slumped her shoulders and kept herself looking at Beardmore. 'You're probably thinking you've just lost your bargaining chip. I'm thinking I want this to be over.'

Makins cocked his head to one side. 'You can open this door?' Benny stepped back. 'No. But I know where Flynn is.'

'Take Lendale there' Makins indicated the guard, although Benny could have guessed that was who he meant.

'Be careful,' Makins warned. 'She's a tricky customer, this one.'

'The customer is always right,' Benny shot back.

Benny led Lendale back to the kitchen.

He was a little nervous around the smashed sabretooth.

'It's dead,' Benny reassured him.

‘They’re evil little sods, aren’t they?’ he asked.

Benny took a deep breath. ‘They’re following their programming.’

‘Just following orders? Yeah, well, the union says that’s no excuse.’

‘You guys are unionised?’

The guard looked offended. ‘You’re joking, right? Time was we could just go around shooting people and punching them in the face. Nowadays, you tap someone on the shoulder and they threaten to sue you. Everyone’s gone soft.’

Benny nodded non-committally. ‘She’s behind there. You’ll have to move the cooker. I’d help, but I’ve got a bad back. Got it barricading her in there.’

‘Yeah, well, life’s full of little ironies, isn’t it?’ He clipped his bolt gun to his belt, then really put his back into moving the cooker. It budged ever so slightly.

Benny edged back.

The cooker screeched about three inches away from the door. Lendale paused for breath, then returned to his task. He moved the cooker aside.

Benny was back at the kitchen doorway now.

‘Don’t stray too far,’ Lendale told her as he opened up the freezer. ‘And don’t think about running – I’ll have your friend, remember...’

The sabretooth leapt out, and the only thing that saved Lendale was that he was swatted aside as the freezer door was flung open. Frost had formed over the robot’s back and legs.

Benny left the two alone to settle their differences, and headed back to the control room.

Beardmore was standing over an unconscious Makins. The door was open, and a frightened-looking Flynn was standing there. She’d been in there all along.

Beardmore was out of breath, almost bent double. He stood up straight when Benny arrived. Benny knew better than to ask how he was, but knew she’d need to find some medical supplies, and fast. ‘One punch,’ he told her. ‘Didn’t even see me coming. I’ve still got it.’ Flynn looked more calm than Benny would have credited.

The guard?’ she asked.

‘One step ahead of him all the way,’ Benny said. ‘That’s how we’ll win this one. Anticipate the problems and neutralise them.’

She turned to see what Flynn was pointing at, and came face to face with the sabretooth she’d just let out of the freezer. It leapt for Beardmore, presumably because he had the bolt gun. He was far too weak to even lift it.

Benny dropped, rolled and grabbed Makins’ blaster from the fallen man’s belt, firing it without waiting to take careful aim. The beam just

deflected off the sabretooth's shiny back. She fired again, but again there was no effect.

Beardmore was on his back, holding the sabretooth up and away from him by the throat. The robot was lowering itself down like a steam press, and was only inches above the hunter.

Benny ran up to the robot, pressed the blaster to its temple and fired. Again, no effect. The robot snapped its jaws, almost taking Beardmore's chin off.

'You've got it set on stun,' Beardmore gasped.

Benny changed the setting and blew the robot's head off with one shot. It collapsed on Beardmore, and it took Benny, Flynn and Beardmore a couple of minutes to ease it off him.

'Now what?' Beardmore asked.

They found a basic medical kit in Makins' aircar, and patched up Beardmore's shattered knee. He needed to rest.

Flynn had used her time in the control room to confirm that there were no more wild sabretooths in the colony buildings. The nearest were in the foothills, though, and heading their way. They'd be here in six hours, the best they could guess. Thankfully, there just weren't that many sabretooths, yet. It was a new design, one that would take a while to supersede the wolves.

Flynn and Benny led Beardmore to the dome with the trees in, and let him sleep. They locked Makins in the freezer, making sure he didn't have any more weapons or communications gear. They turned off the freezer, after some debate.

Lendale was dead. By now, little service robots were out and about, wiping up the blood and bits that Benny and her friends' arrival had inflicted on the buildings. The front door had already been repaired.

Benny and Flynn sat in the Fruit dome, nibbling at raspberries.

'This base has been kept pristine for centuries. We've been here less than a day, and look what a mess we've made.'

Actually, none of the fighting had reached this far, but Benny hoped Flynn would understand her point.

Flynn was looking oddly at her. 'Centuries?'

Benny nodded.

'But you know where the robots came from,' Flynn reminded her.

'The Eagle probe,' Benny agreed. 'The robots built the base, but some of them got out. The probe keeps building replacements. Over the centuries, they've spread across the planet.'

'The Eagle probe hasn't been here for centuries,' Flynn said.

'Eh?' Benny was preoccupied with a tricky raspberry, one that was particularly juicy.

'The Eagle probe left Earth's solar system in 2040. But it was

travelling at sublight speeds and didn't arrive here in System 81 until very recently.'

Benny had known this, of course, but it hadn't sunk in. 'How long?' she asked.

Flynn passed over her handheld. 'I think it arrived here last January.' Benny almost spat out her fruit. 'It's been here less than two years?'

'That's right.'

'The trees in the other dome are overgrown.'

'All the seeds were engineered for fast growth.'

'Wow.'

Somehow, keeping a building clean for a few months was a less impressive feat than keeping one perfectly preserved for half a millennium. Although, as Benny thought about it, she had been known to mess up a room within a few minutes.

She looked out over the dome. This was one of the cases where her archaeological skills were useless. The seed beds could be a few months old, or they could have been here for ten thousand years. Kept in perfect condition by the robots, there was no way of telling.

When she'd walked naked in the cool of the evening in the Tree dome, it had felt like the Garden of Eden. Well, the analogy had been closer than she'd realised at the time. Eden had been just as much of a trick. Both had been conjured up in a day or so, created with trees faked to look fully grown.

'It's beautiful here,' Benny said to Flynn.

I've not been spending my time stopping to smell the roses,' Flynn admitted. 'I'd rather be back on Petuaria.'

'I'm sorry I involved you in all this.'

'Nothing that's happened was your fault,' Flynn told her. 'You've saved my life over and over. I've only been scratched and bruised, nothing serious. But this really isn't how I want to live. I don't understand why you'd want to do this all the time. Couldn't you just get tenure at some Inner League university?'

'I'd die of boredom. I've never thought of myself as anything particularly special,' Benny said quietly.

'You think you're ordinary?' Flynn asked.

Benny thought about it. 'I'm not sure anyone's ordinary,' she said. 'We're all unique, just like everybody else.'

'No... not that. I just mean... well, what's ordinary? What point do you measure it from?'

'Petuaria is pretty ordinary.'

'It isn't, though. When the Eagle probe was launched, flying around in spaceships and living on alien planets was what mankind dreamt of. A generation before that, the launch of the Eagle probe was just a

fantasy.'

Flynn peeled a banana and considered it, before she took a bite. 'If you follow it back far enough, you get to ordinary, I suppose.'

'If you follow it back far enough, all you get to is an ounce of matter a billionth the size of a proton.'

'I was thinking about the Garden of Eden,' Flynn said.

Now that's a dig I'd like to go on,' Benny said.

'Isn't that what this place is? Or should be. Do you think the colonists would have bothered, if they'd thought their descendants were going to end up building shops and offices on Petuaria?'

Beardmore had arrived. He was in terrible shape, looking ready to collapse.

'You were meant to be resting,' Benny said sternly.

'I can't reach the ship,' Beardmore said, holding up Makins' communicator.

'There was a big storm front between here and there, it's probably just -'

'There's no signal at all. I can't pick up any chatter. There ought to be hunting teams out, and you'd think someone would be missing Makins by now.'

Benny glanced back towards the habitation dome, unconsciously looking Makins' way.

'We need to get back there,' Beardmore said.

'You're in no condition to travel,' she warned him.

'We need to know what's happening,' Beardmore insisted.

Flynn had an idea...

* * * *

They couldn't believe it, but it was there in front of them.

Screen after screen in the colony control room showed the hunters' ship down on the ground. It was early evening at the colony, but night over the hunters' ship. The robot eyes they were watching the ship through couldn't give them much more than impressions.

The best they could make out, the ship was under siege. There were hunters on the topside of the ship, blasting away with rifles.

A white line scored across half a dozen of the screens, pointing at different angles on each one.

A section of the ship was peppered with tiny explosions.

'We have to get over there,' Beardmore told them.

'What would we be able to do?' Flynn whimpered. It was, though, a fair question.

'Is there any way of shutting them off from here?' Beardmore asked.

'Of course there isn't,' Benny said.

'What brought the ship down?' Flynn asked.

‘Makins...’ Beardmore snarled, hobbling out of the room.

Benny was close behind. ‘How could he have done it? We locked him in the fridge and took that communicator.’

‘Some sort of arrangement? “If I’m not back in a few hours”, something like that?’

‘Is there another ship?’

‘Not that can achieve orbit on its own.’

‘Not a sloop or shuttle? Not even a landing craft?’

‘We don’t need them. There’s a ten-man courier rocket with a hyperdrive, but it’s not fitted for atmospheric flight.’

Benny tried to grab his sleeve, but even in his weakened state, he shrugged her off without even trying. Benny found herself following to the kitchen.

‘Then think: why would he maroon himself here?’

Beardmore stopped.

‘They assume he’s dead, so he’s not marooned.’

‘Who do?’

He looked away. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps it was automatic.’

‘What was?’

Beardmore turned on her. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps we should ask him.’

‘Listen to yourself. It doesn’t make sense. Okay. Ask another question: what could bring down your ship?’

Beardmore started to move again. He was stepping into the kitchen, eyes firmly on the freezer door.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Exactly. It’s an old warship. My father served on ships like that, I used to sit at home reading everything there was to read about them. It doesn’t matter what sort of attack you launch, they’re almost impossible to bring down. And you just can’t sabotage them, or crash their computers.’

Beardmore hadn’t opened the freezer door yet. They could hear Makins walking around in his makeshift cell.

Benny paused for a moment. Beardmore took the opportunity to open the door.

Makins tried to rush him, Beardmore chopped his throat. The businessman choked and fell.

‘What have you done?’ Beardmore asked.

Makins coughed something.

‘What have you done?’ Beardmore asked again.

Makins pointed to his throat. ‘Can’t speak, old moron,’ he managed to spit out.

Beardmore grabbed him and lifted him up. ‘I’m injured, too,’ Beardmore said, giving no indication this was true.

‘What’s happened?’ Makins asked, trying to keep himself composed. ‘The hunters’ ship has crashed,’ Benny told him. ‘Beardmore thinks you did it.’

He looked shocked, but then he’d be very careful to.

‘How?’ He asked. ‘I’ve been in here the whole time.’

‘We don’t know how you did it,’ Beardmore told him quietly. ‘We just want you to fix it.’

‘I don’t have another way off the planet,’ Makins said. ‘It makes no sense to think I did this.’

Benny looked meaningfully over at Beardmore. ‘That’s what I said.’

Makins edged a little closer to Benny, trying to drive a wedge, physically and psychologically. It was so transparent a ploy that Benny felt insulted he thought it would work. ‘You were right. Look... we have to get back to the ship.’

‘And that’s what I said,’ Beardmore noted.

‘I know you don’t trust me. Well... stun me if you want.’ Beardmore raised an eyebrow, then punched Makins so hard he almost hit the back wall, six feet from where he’d been standing. Benny held up the gun she’d liberated from Makins before. ‘I think he meant with this.’

Beardmore shrugged.

The four of them were soon under way. Benny and Flynn carried Makins and secured him to one of the back seats. Beardmore dozed beside him, recuperating.

Benny was driving, Flynn was sat in the passenger seat. On the trip back, unlike the trip here, the young woman was wide awake. Not that there was much to do: plotting a course to the hunters’ ship was simply a matter of asking the autopilot. Benny had checked the weather map. This time, they wouldn’t even be crossing the storm front. It would be many hours before they reached the ship, though, even at maximum speed.

They flew off into the dark, crossed the terminator that separated the day and night sides of the planet.

Benny and Flynn chatted, on far friendlier terms than they had before, and at no point did they acknowledge that they didn’t have a plan in place for what happened when they arrived at the hunters’ ship. Makins was awake within an hour or so, but keeping his own counsel.

An hour before they arrived, they woke Beardmore and discussed options. The first thing was to turn the communicator on. At this distance, they could pick out a lot of radio traffic – all of it, as far as they could establish was coming from the hunters’ ship, or very close indeed. There was so much chatter that individual messages were difficult to parse out. Beardmore recognised snatches of combat codes

and call signs. There was a pitched battle under way, and no small amount of confusion. Benny could sense Beardmore's frustration and need to get into the thick of the action to rally the troops.

There was a major power source registering – the only thing any of them could think of was that it was the main drive of the hunters' ship, and it was consistent with that. So the working assumption was that someone on the ship had managed to restore power since they'd seen pictures of it blacked out and beached.

Benny brought the aircar in high, set the in-car camera to maximum zoom and flew slowly over the ship.

The first thing they noticed was that it was still intact. The second was that it was airborne.

Benny brought the aircar round and down for a better look. Flynn switched on the car's searchlight.

The hunters' ship was about a hundred feet in the air. The searchlight formed out a narrow white circle on the hull and swept along it, trawling for clues. There was a set of gashes and holes on the starboard side, animal tooth and claw marks, like the one they'd seen the sabretooths make as they tore around the colony. A closer fly-by showed that there was a battle raging. There were firefights visible as flashes through many of the portholes. There were also about a dozen hunters on the topside of the ship, picking off what looked like sabretooths and giant pelicans.

It wasn't possible to get close enough to see any more or to help them out. The hunters were too busy with their task to see the aircar – probably for the best, as they might have misidentified the vehicle as a hostile flying animal.

They tried to contact the ship, but no-one was in the radio room or listening out.

They circled one more time, this time looking at the ground. The grass plain was pocked, burned. Metal fragments were being gnawed or tugged away by a variety of carnivores, the robot analogues of hyenas, rats and the occasional wolf. From time to time, wreckage would dislodge from the ship, crashing down to the surface. Directly underneath the ship was a hazardous place to be for a robot – they saw one crushed by a piece of falling bulkhead – but a rewarding one if they stayed lucky. If nothing else, they could always cannibalise their less fortunate cousins. There were plenty of animals down there whose internal processors had done the maths and decided that the strategy to stay was worth the risk.

It was time for some processing and strategy of their own.

'What do we do?' Benny asked.

'My men have done the right thing,' Beardmore said. 'While the ship

was on the ground, it was vulnerable. Every animal on the planet could get aboard. In the air, they've got a limited problem. All they have to do is pick off the animals in the ship.'

A panel on the side of the hunters' ship exploded, sending a jet of flame and shrapnel showering out. Benny pulled the aircar up to avoid the debris. She could already see animals on the ground rushing to intercept it where it fell.

'If the ship falls again, everyone in it will be dead,' she told them. 'There are hundreds of wolves there, not to mention all the other critters.'

'We should keep trying to contact someone,' Makins said. 'Get them to brief us on the onboard situation.'

'No-one's answering,' Benny reminded him.

Beardmore leant towards Benny. 'Take her in,' he said softly. The action seems to be on the starboard side. Let's land at the port side, get the lie of the land.'

Benny weighed up the options, and decided to do as Beardmore had suggested.

'Autodocking is offline,' she said. 'So this might be a little –'

The aircar rocked as it entered the landing bay, lurching them all forwards. Benny found an empty docking cradle and put the ship down on it. She'd managed to park it the wrong way round, meaning they'd have to clamber around the car to get out.

The hangar bay, at least, seemed calm enough. There wasn't anyone around, though. Benny opened her door, Beardmore did the same.

No hidden robots leapt out and ate them. No hunter accidentally shot them.

Flynn sidled up to Benny while Beardmore and Makins led the way into the body of the ship. 'Benny, remember when the *Sataspes* crashed?'

Benny raised an eyebrow. A strange question.

'Just after we came to a halt, you said the ship's systems crashed.'

Benny had completely forgotten. 'You think the same thing happened to the hunters' ship? That was why it was on the ground before.'

Flynn nodded.

'It quickly got back to normal,' Benny reminded herself. 'I assumed it was a computer virus. I suppose viruses are part of any balanced ecology. It makes sense that they would evolve and survive here.'

'It was some sort of invasive reprogramming,' Flynn said. 'Whether it was technically a virus... well, it doesn't matter. I don't think it was an organism in the same way the robot animals are. I think... look, this is going to sound ridiculous.'

'Go on.'

‘Well, okay. On Petuaria, there are two data crystal manufacturers, okay? Kallibot and Petrutech. And the thing is the players you buy can only play one type of crystal.’

‘Pretty standard business practice. Two companies, bitter rivals precisely because they provide exactly the same service. I’m an historian of the twentieth century, remember? McDonalds and Burger King, PC and Apple. Practically the same product, but each one inspires tremendous loyalty. Tell a Pepsi drinker what they drink tastes like Coke, and they’d vehemently deny it, tell Pepsi and they’d probably sue’ Benny paused. ‘They’re in the same evolutionary niche, if you like, of course they’re going to fight.’

Flynn was practically tapping her feet, waiting for Benny to finish. ‘Sorry,’ Benny added.

‘The thing is, anyone can just get their crystal player to play both. It’s an open secret. You just enter a special code you can find on the datanet. It makes the picture flicker for a second, then it’s done.’

Benny tried to remember how they’d got onto this topic. ‘That happened to the *Sataspes*? You think that it was *region hacked*?’

‘Yes.’ said Flynn. The technology of the ship was made compatible with the robots. That done, they could use it. It’s hard enough to get a computer program from five years ago to run on a machine from the same manufacturer.’

‘Hell, it’s hard enough to get them to run at the best of times,’ Benny grumbled.

‘Exactly. Yet we’re saying that some space probe from the dark ages was able to just grab technology from the twenty-seventh century and use it without any problem?’

Benny nodded. ‘Okay... how can we use that information?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘There’s a fight going on. How can we use our knowledge of the region hack to beat the animals?’

Beardmore and Makins were waiting for them. Benny and Flynn followed them out into the corridor.

Silence had rarely been more eerie.

There weren’t any people around. This was the reception area that Benny had arrived in the first time she’d been brought here. Then, the area had been bustling with hunters. It was a big ship, but everywhere had seemed busy. It had almost been overcrowded.

Benny realised that at some point since they’d landed, she’d drawn the gun she’d liberated from Makins.

‘Where is everyone?’ its former owner asked.

‘There’s an intercom behind the desk,’ Beardmore told them. He moved round, tapped at a few controls, and a moment later, what he

was saying echoed around from hidden speakers. 'Now hear this: this is Beardmore. I'm in the port reception area. Someone in charge please report when they can. Thank you.'

'We wait?' Makins asked hopefully.

'No,' Beardmore said. 'We head to the action.'

'Would we be doing so with, say, a plan of some kind?' Benny wondered aloud.

'Yes: "save my men",' Beardmore replied curtly.

Benny followed Beardmore into a lift, and Makins and Flynn followed them.

'Could I at least have my gun back?' Makins asked. 'Or perhaps a bigger gun than the one I had before? The young lady might appreciate one, too.'

'I've never fired one in my life,' Flynn said.

'Now might be a good time to start,' Makins shot back. 'If, of course, we're allowed to.'

'Shut up, Makins,' Beardmore said.

'I'm still your employer. If you want to be paid, then –'

Beardmore was ignoring him. Benny was just impressed that he wasn't, as promised earlier, stuffing his bolt gun up Makins' arse.

'Who will be in charge here with you gone?' she asked the hunter.

'If he's alive, a man named Daniels. We need to get in touch with –'

As if on cue, Beardmore's radio beeped. 'Danno here, sir.'

'What's going on?'

'Some of the carnivores we captured got loose. There was a power blackout, and the antigravs failed. We ended up hitting the ground pretty hard, and cracking the hull. More animals from outside came through the cracks.'

They could hear the whines of bolt guns in the background of the transmission.

'You got the ship working again. Do you know how many animals are on board?'

'No way of telling. We've tried sealing them off, but they can eat metal.'

'Believe me, I know. Is the ship secure?'

'The ship's fine, sir. You know how tough she is.'

Beardmore looked proud.

'But the hyperdrive needs repairing,' Daniels added. 'The whole unit's shot, and we've leaked almost all of our fuel.'

'I think we should take her into a low orbit,' Makins said.

The other three looked at him, baffled.

'The robots adapt. They've been on this ship for hours, devouring hi-tech equipment. They'll be adopting new forms. Have they got through to the armoury?'

Daniels said they hadn't.

'Good. But even with access to just the less sensitive parts of this ship, they'll already have upgraded their computing power, their speed and agility, and they'll have all sorts of new materials to work with.'

'Why would going into space help?' Flynn asked.

A good question, thought Benny.

'The robots are programmed to survive. At the moment, they can kill us all and tear the ship apart. In space, they'll need us alive, and the ship intact.'

Benny was sceptical. 'They'll know that, will they?'

Flynn nodded. 'He's right. These things are smart. They'll realise the situation has changed.'

Benny was trying to work the logic through, trying to think like one of the robots. She remembered the packs scavenging under the ship. She tried not to think too hard about them being there now, beneath her feet. 'They're programmed to survive, and they can quickly come up with novel strategies to do that.'

Beardmore wasn't happy. 'You think they'll call a truce?'

Flynn shook her head. 'I think they'll stop attacking the structure of the ship, though.'

'We need to think this through,' Beardmore deadpanned.

'The fuel you need for the hyperdrive is up there,' Makins said. 'It will take a few days to scoop, and we'll need to do some asteroid prospecting, but all the basic elements are just floating around in space.'

Flynn nodded. 'It's simple enough to do.'

'You could do it?' Benny asked.

'I have,' she confirmed. 'It's basic stuff: some radioactives, some deuterium, some of the more peculiar forms of helium. All exotic on a planet, but just floating around in space.'

They headed to Daniels' position. This was in a secure area a level below them – ironically, usually used for livestock. It was a labyrinth of railings, bars, shutters and ironwork. It wasn't very well lit, and there was a distinct smell of animal dung and disinfectant. Beardmore moved through the area without hesitation.

'How long have you lived on this ship?' Benny asked.

Beardmore didn't seem to hear her.

Makins was looking around nervously. 'Did you just hear something?'

They were walking down one of the cattle runs. It wasn't easy to see where they were heading. It was a slight downward slope.

'Keep quiet,' Benny suggested.

There was a clicking, clacking noise. Metal on metal.

Benny and Beardmore both had their guns up.

‘I think it’s –’ Benny began, before Beardmore indicated she should stay quiet.

To their left was a solid wall, possibly even an outside bulkhead. To their right, a row of metal fencing with another cattle run on the other side, lying parallel with the one they were walking down.

Benny moved carefully, aware that if firing started in such close quarters then she would be as likely to hit Beardmore as anything in front of him.

The clacking was all around them. Benny realised that the animal wasn’t on the same level as they were, glanced up at the ceiling – and the floor underneath her gave way.

Benny and Makins fell ten feet through a gash in the floor. She saw the carnivores lying in wait for them before landing uncomfortably on her back. Three wolves.

They calculated their actions, watching Benny and Makins impassively, all three deciding which one to attack. She and Beardmore had blown all three of them apart before they moved.

Benny took a moment to calm herself down.

Flynn leant over the hole, looking down at Benny.

‘Are you all right?’

Benny was looking around. It was some sort of service duct, or at least it wasn’t a part of the ship people came down very often. Makins was poking the remains of one of the wolves.

‘I think we’re alone,’ Benny answered. ‘So, it could be worse.’

She glanced at the wolves. Their casings looked like they’d been welded up to repair them. Could they do that to themselves, some sort of self-healing? Whatever the case, they must have been captured specimens. She wondered if they were the ones that had killed Johannsen.

‘Can you get back up?’ Flynn asked from ten feet above her.

‘Can I fly, you mean?’ Benny said, grumpily.

‘Don’t you have a rope?’ Makins said.

‘No, amazingly enough, I don’t carry ten-foot ropes around with me. Now, obviously, as you asked the question, and you assume it’s perfectly normal to carry ropes everywhere, you must have one of your own you could lend me, so if you could whip it out?’

Benny had always found satisfaction in sarcasm.

‘We’ll have to head that way –’ Beardmore pointed on ahead ‘– and you’ll have to do your best to catch up.’

There wasn’t any arguing.

Benny ushered Makins away from the wrecked robots.

It was a corridor. Makins had never been down here, and it wasn’t

clear if anyone had been in the last couple of years. There were utility lights dotted along the walls, giving them a route to follow. They could hear Beardmore and Flynn's footsteps echoing above them, and they tried to keep up.

Benny wanted Makins in front of her, where she could see him. This did block the view ahead, of course.

'We should be heading for the control room,' Makins said.

'I think the technical term is "bridge",' Benny said, remembering her brief career as a starship captain.

Makins smiled condescendingly at her. 'You know something? I don't care. As far as I'm concerned only rivers have bridges. We should get this ship into space, as soon as possible.'

'You're obsessed with the idea.'

'I have no great interest in being killed. This is the best way to avoid that.'

There were shots fired above them. A bolt gun firing off a burst. Then silence.

Benny waited, but couldn't hear anything. No voices, no footsteps, no robots.

'We should –' she started to say, looking up.

She was interrupted by Makins trying to grab her gun.

He grabbed her wrist with one hand, the barrel of the gun with another. He was strong. Benny was stronger.

She snatched the gun away, then brought the butt down on his nose. It squirted a very satisfying amount of blood.

'The bridge of your nose,' she noted. 'Ironically.'

'You're psychotic.'

'I'm really not. I'm rather the opposite, if anything.'

He dabbed at his nose with his finger. 'I must have met you on a bad day.'

'As opposed to a good one?' she asked. 'Are you going to calm down, now, work with me, or should I just shoot you.'

'You'd kill me?'

'I'd stun you,' Benny assured him. 'The wolves that then found you would kill you.'

They were close to a bulkhead door. There was no way of checking what was on the other side. Benny made Makins open it.

A small room, some sort of observation lounge. A couple of old chairs and tables arranged to point out of the large window. It was pitch black outside. For a moment, Benny wondered if the ship had lifted off to space after all.

'Do you recognise this room?' she asked.

'No. It's a big ship, I didn't get the tour.'

Benny went over to the window. She could just about make out the

ground a hundred metres below, but couldn't tell either way if it was still swarming with animals. The ship she was looking out over seemed intact, up and down, and to both sides. She decided this was the front of the ship, the prow of the delta-V.

Makins was looking with her. 'I think we're directly below the bridge. Six floors, maybe seven.'

'How do we get up?' Benny had seen very little of this ship.

Between them, they found a lift a few doors down from the lounge. Getting onto the bridge required a code, but Makins had it. They waited for the lift.

And waited.

Benny realised it wasn't coming. There weren't any stairways in the vicinity.

'Help me get these doors open,' Benny asked Makins.

'You're joking. Have you got any idea how far six or seven floors up is?'

Benny waved the gun around. 'I've still got this,' she said.

'All right, all right,' Makins squealed, and began to prise the lift doors open.

Benny was fed up with being misjudged. 'I meant on the door,' she clarified.

Makins moved out of the way and Benny melted the lift doors.

Deus ex Machina

There was an emergency ladder running all the way up the lift shaft. Makins was right, though. It was a steep climb, and Benny's arms and thighs quickly became stiff and cramped.

She didn't look down. Makins did at one point, and didn't like what he saw. The lift shaft was as gloomy and industrial as every other one Benny had ever seen. There was no sign at all that the elevator system was in use, and there were, thankfully, no cars or other obstructions in the way.

Which was actually a bit worrying – almost all ships would secure the bridge in an emergency, and most would have some emergency hatches that would seal off the lift shafts. The hull had been breached. If this ship had been in space, and one of those cracks in the outer bulkheads had affected one part of the system, the whole network of lift shafts would be subject to explosive decompression. As, indeed, would any part of the ship where someone opened a lift door. If nothing else, it would mean sharp bits of broken lift hurtling around the length of the ship, which couldn't ever be good news.

Something to bear in mind before they put the ship in orbit. She made a mental note.

The last stage involved hanging on to a rung with one hand and melting the lift door with another, then holstering the gun and getting across to the doorway. None of this was as easy as the designer of the ship had evidently assumed it would be when he'd come up with the emergency procedures.

She hesitated.

'Can you hear something?' Makins asked.

Benny would have shrugged if she hadn't been using all the relevant bits of her body to cling on for dear life. Instead, she returned to trying to melt open the lift door.

The doors ripped apart, twin fangs slicing down, embedding themselves in the sill of the door, on either side of Benny's hand.

It took a great deal of self control not to snatch the hand away, but Benny persuaded herself that falling all the way down a lift shaft wasn't for the best. A second later, as the sabretooth withdrew for another try, she wasn't so sure.

Makins had clambered up to the control panel and wedged himself into place. Now he was working at some emergency access point. 'What the hell are you doing?' Benny asked, as the sabretooth lunged into the elevator doors, buckling them a little.

‘Opening it.’ Makins shouted over.

Benny glared at him.

The doors slid open just as the sabretooth made another charge. It came flying through the gap, then fell down the shaft, sparking and clawing the side as it went. A couple of seconds later, there was a very satisfying clattering and smashing.

Makins was looking pleased with himself. ‘I hoped that would happen,’ he told her.

‘And if it didn’t, then it wouldn’t be you it killed.’

‘I figured that if you were going to plummet to your death, you’d make sure you took the robot with you,’ he said matter-of-factly.

Benny ignored him, clambered up, at long last, onto the bridge. This was a triangular room, and like a lot of starships’ bridges, it looked like an ocean liner and airliner had compromised on the decor – lots of positions and control panels, arranged so that everyone could see everyone else. There was a vast window on the front wall, and in front of that a holographic display was showing the same scene, but interpreted and annotated by the ship’s computer.

There was a dead hunter on the floor, machine pistol still grasped in his hand.

There was a sabretooth on every console, tearing into it, feasting on the cables and wiring like they were the innards of some fallen gazelle. Eleven sabretooths in all. None of them quite the same as the others. Some of them had new, green, eyes that spoke of them swallowing night vision goggles, some with larger heads or sleeker bodies. One had a bolt gun strapped to its back, which now swivelled around until it was facing her.

‘Ah,’ Benny said.

She dived for cover, but no bolts came, only the sound of a bolt gun locking and loading, locking and loading.

Benny stood. ‘Ha! Run out of ammo.’

It leapt at her. She had time to see it coming, and dropped, but it had guessed she would do this. It landed neatly on top of Benny, pinning her leg under her.

This hurt.

It also made it hard to move. The creature’s four legs were like the bars of a cage. She was angling around for her gun, trying to work out how to get it into a position where she could blow off the robot’s head without taking her own with it in the blast.

The sabretooth swung its head down and bit the gun in half. It swallowed the first bit, then the remainder.

Where was Makins, she wondered.

The robot paused for a moment, like it was digesting. Was it downloading the schematics of the gun? Benny didn’t care: all that

mattered was that it might be a chance to get away.

She tried to wriggle free, and then the robot slammed a paw down, practically stapling her to the deck.

Trapped.

Benny had got off lightly, as she would have known if she'd seen the rest of the ship.

Beardmore and Flynn had met up with Daniels.

'Danno.' Beardmore said.

Daniels was looking Flynn up and down. 'Always able to find yourself a woman, eh, old man? Disgusting at your age. It's disgusting at her age, for that matter.'

'At least I've not just been outsmarted by a bunch of robot badgers,' Flynn replied.

This was a reference to a new type of robot, not quite a herbivore, not quite a carnivore. They resembled, as Flynn had noted, badgers, with fat bodies, short legs and a pointed skull. Daniels' party had been blocked in by a pack of them. The creatures weren't hostile – they'd nibbled their way through the wires that triggered the emergency lockdown of their section of the ship. Every door had closed, locked and bolted itself. The larger ones had defence systems that had activated – so now, some doors gave electric shocks or sprayed stun gas.

Electric shocks and stun gas didn't affect robots, only humans.

The badgers, who were getting from now-sealed compartment to compartment via some ducting or other, kept setting off the defences, so that the ship now reeked of ozone and the sweet tang of anaesthetic gas. Every time they did so, the hunters had to cram themselves over on the other side of the compartment to avoid getting blasted.

Daniels swung his machine pistol around, and fired a burst at the three badgers who'd just done that. The robots were all instantly ripped apart, as was a lot of the deck around them.

'You're wasting ammunition,' Beardmore told him.

'What's the plan, chief?' Daniels asked him. The handful of men that made up the rest of the group clearly wanted to know, too.

'We survive,' Beardmore said. 'We do that by taking the fight to the robots – moving forwards, clearing an area, sealing it off, closing it off, moving forwards.'

Flynn stared back at the sealed hatches. 'Looks like we don't get much choice about that.'

Beardmore nodded. 'You're right. We don't.'

His communicator beeped, and he answered it.

Another group of hunters was pinned down at the armoury. Wolves, not sabretooths, but a couple of packs of them. They estimated thirty

animals.

‘All those weapons must be like bait for them,’ Flynn noted. ‘We could get over there and –’

Beardmore and Daniels were looking away, conferring.

‘Ahem?’ Flynn asked.

‘It’s three levels from here, on the other side of the ship,’ Beardmore told her.

‘So?’

‘So they’re dead,’ Daniels said. ‘We wouldn’t get there in time. Not with the lift system unreliable.’

‘And not if we don’t even try,’ Flynn pointed out. ‘If you’re not going to go, I will –’

Beardmore grabbed her sleeve. ‘You don’t know where you’re going, you’d be no help if you got there and I’m not going to let you leave.’

Flynn hesitated. ‘They’re your men,’ she told him.

‘They’re trained hunters, they’ve got access to the ship’s armoury.

‘If the robots get in there...’ Flynn started.

Beardmore winced.

‘We could destroy the armoury, sir,’ Daniels told him.

‘From the bridge?’

‘It would need your code and mine, that’s all.’

‘If you do that, won’t you kill the men there?’ Flynn told them.

Beardmore looked back at her. ‘Yes,’ he told her.

Makins was edging around the room, now. Ominously, he wasn’t making eye contact with Benny. He was, in fact, very carefully avoiding looking in her direction.

The sabretooths were all busy. The one pinning Benny to the floor was now chewing at a control panel. It knew Benny wasn’t going anywhere or posing a threat.

Regrettably, Benny agreed with the analysis.

So, it was up to Makins. This wasn’t entirely to Benny’s liking. If Makins had come up with a plan that saved his skin but not hers, then he’d take it.

He was edging open a panel close to the back wall.

One of the sabretooths looked up, but returned to feasting on an astronavigation console. It was munching up data discs. If they were the relevant discs, then it had just destroyed the data that would have led the ship safely out of the gravity distortions. If not, it would get to those in a few minutes.

Makins pulled off the panel, throwing it at the sabretooths.

All of them looked up, now, even the one standing over Benny.

Makins was pulling away circuit boards and throwing them at the sabretooths like he was feeding the ducks round a pond. He was

exposing a power cable.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Benny asked. ‘If you want to die, just throw yourself down the lift shaft.’

One of the sabretooths leapt for Makins, further and faster than Benny had seen one leap so far.

Makins barely got out of the way in time. The sabretooth crashed into the access niche. It stood, looked around, and started munching at the exposed circuitry.

It’s tooth must have brushed against the cable.

A bolt of lightning arced out, through the sabretooth, bursting it open. It kept going, lashing out, splitting into a dozen other bolts of lightning, looking to earth itself. Bolts hit every console, every exposed piece of metal, and every sabretooth.

The creature towering over Benny crackled with blue electricity. It hung in the air, tried to find routes to the walls and floor, singed her eyebrows, but never quite connected.

Electricity danced across the whole bridge, destroying the robots. And it wasn’t even a split second later when it was over, and all the sabretooths were dead.

The emergency lighting and power kicked in again after about two seconds. Benny kicked in again a few seconds after that.

She wondered if she’d been burned, whether she was having a heart attack, whether there were little pockets of electricity left around the place.

She was alive, though, and the robots were dead. That was a pretty good start.

‘I didn’t think electricity killed these things,’ Benny said, standing up and dislodging her captor.

Makins was looking extremely smug. ‘I guess enough of it does,’ he replied. ‘Can you fly one of these things?’ He indicated the bridge.

Benny turned on him. ‘I’m an archaeologist. Of course I can’t fly a warship.’

‘Well, I thought you’d know. I’m a business analyst, how would I be expected to –’

‘You didn’t think to ask this question before I shinned up six storeys of lift shaft?’

‘How difficult can it be?’

‘What did you say?’

‘How difficult can it be to fly a starship?’

Benny glared him. ‘How difficult can it be? Let’s see... space pilots take three years to train up, and they then spend five years as copilots. You need a team of people to navigate, you need a team of engineers to get it to work. There are, as you’ll see the remains of eleven pilot consoles here in this cockpit. You think it’s just a matter of going

“Computer: take the ship into orbit?”

‘Confirmed,’ a pleasant female voice echoed. The ship started to lurch slowly upwards, like a lift car.

‘Bloody unions,’ Makins said. ‘Ninety per cent of the work in this galaxy could be done by robots, you know. We end having to pay eleven fully qualified pilots to say one sentence to a computer. Who do you think pays for all this? The corporations, then the consumer. But, no, I’m all right Jack, with my pilot’s salary and retiring at fifty. It makes me sick.’

‘Yeah, well, judging by this planet it looks like robots have labour relations issues of their own.’

The sky was already darkening as they passed the tropopause. ‘Computer,’ Benny said quickly, ‘Is the ship’s hull secure for space flight?’

‘Confirmed. The hull is intact and the main body of the ship is pressurised. All crewmen are in the pressurised areas.’

The sky was almost black, now. The stars swam a little in the night’s sky, distorted by this solar system’s gravity distortions.

‘We’re using antigravs?’ Benny asked. ‘I mean: computer, we’re using antigravs?’

‘Confirmed.’

‘Computer, will that be affected by the gravity distortions in this system?’

‘Negative. The gravity tides in this system could only be affected by a vast disruption to space-time.’

‘Computer. Define a possible disruption.’

‘A ship entering hyperspace too close to the planet, or the explosion of a gravitronic engine.’

‘Computer. So we’re all right as long as we don’t enter hyperspace or blow up?’

‘Confirmed.’

‘Hold this position. I mean: computer, hold this position. I hate this “Simon says” nonsense.’

‘Confirmed.’

The ship was in orbit. Makins looked pleased with himself. ‘We’ve contained the problem.’

Benny smiled. ‘Yeah, but we haven’t solved it.’ She moved around the various control panels. Very little was labelled, or made intuitive sense, at least to her. It didn’t help that so much of it had been smashed up by the sabretooths.

Makins was doing the same, looking around for something.

‘I’m trying to find the intercom and internal monitors,’ she told him.

‘Me too,’ Makins said, blatantly lying.

Benny moved over, gun in hand. ‘Step away.’

‘Oh, come on.’

She played around with the gun theatrically. ‘I don’t think this has a stun setting.’

Makins edged back, stood in the middle of the room, facing out.

‘Good,’ Benny told him. ‘Now, what were you doing?’

‘Seeing if my staff were okay. The ones you didn’t kill.’

‘The animals killed them, I didn’t kill any of them.’

‘You could look Lendale’s wife in the eye and say that, could you?’

‘My guess is that Bantu will make sure that Lendale’s wife isn’t told anything about the real circumstances of his death. Isn’t the whole point of this operation that it’s secret and deniable?’

Makins looked away from her.

‘Now who’s not looking someone in the eye?’

Makins’ eyes were wide, he was staring over her shoulder. ‘What’s that?’

‘That? Oh, let me think... oh yes, got it! That would be the oldest trick in the book,’ Benny told him, without batting an eyelid.

‘Professor...’

Benny rolled her eyes. ‘Computer, what can Makins see?’

‘There is an unidentified starship on an intercept course,’ the computer reported.

* * * *

Benny turned around. There had been no contact with the armoury for several minutes. There were other hunter groups around, though. All of them were in combat. One had just finished clearing the top of the ship, and was sending out drones to check the rest of the hull. Beardmore told them to carry on the good work.

A couple of the groups were holding defensive positions. Beardmore ordered them forward. He knew the ship well. However, when Flynn asked, he admitted he’d never fought a battle here before.

‘Never been boarded? Never run combat drills?’

‘There’s one docking port. If we’re boarded, the tactics are easy enough to work out. As for combat drills, well, we’re not the army. We hunt on planets, and we practise hunting on planets.’

Nevertheless, this was an old warship, and the designers had planned for the contingency that the ship would be invaded. Each corridor was designed to be defended – it was nice and wide, with niches facing the docking port for men to duck into for cover. It was relatively easy to completely seal off sections of the ship. Beardmore had access to the ship’s computer, and could mark off the quarantined compartments. The robots were already confined to about a quarter of the ship, and didn’t seem to be spreading.

Flynn could tell that the computer systems were erratic, though. She

wasn't sure they could be relied on. Beardmore and the loathsome Daniels didn't take her concerns seriously until they were attacked by crocodiles.

The three robots were lying in wait for them in a dark corridor, nestled in fallen cables and roofing material. The computer had declared this section completely clear. It continued to assert this as three sets of whirring buzzsaw jaws reared up, almost taking off Flynn's legs.

One of the hunters moved to box the nose of one of them. This was probably how you dealt with real crocodiles. The robot version simply lifted itself up and tore into the man's arms.

Flynn helped pull him back as Beardmore and Daniels fired at point blank range into his attacker's mouth. The crocodile fell back, and was devoured by its two colleagues.

She could see the man's raw muscles and even flecks of bone. Calling the injury a flesh wound did it a disservice – great cubes and strips of flesh had been gouged out of his arms. Still, nothing was broken. Stop the bleeding and numb the pain, he'd live.

He was going into shock. Flynn's source of first aid advice was a random selection of war films and medical soaps. It surprised her now how little detail these went into.

She whipped off her belt and used it to cut off the blood flow to one of the arms. It took a whole panicked minute to realise she could use the man's own belt on the other arm. By then, he'd gone into shock.

Behind her, the battle continued. Flynn wasn't taking any of that in.

Finally, the man was unconscious, but not bleeding to death. The crocodiles were three piles of wreckage amongst rubble from the ship.

Daniels came over, checked Flynn's work and made a couple of adjustments.

'He'll live.'

Beardmore ordered Daniels and Flynn to dump the fallen man in a big overhead locker.

'He'll be safe, there,' he reasoned. 'We can't have him slow us down.'

'Just don't forget him,' Daniels said, rather amused with the thought. 'We can't rely on the computers,' Flynn said.

Beardmore smirked. 'You don't say. This doesn't change anything. Let's get to the bridge.'

'The armoury will have fallen by now.'

'In which case, it will be full of robots. And blowing it up will get rid of lots of robots.'

Flynn thought about this. 'There's evidence that they can transmit upgrades to other robots. They don't have to eat the tech to get the upgrade. Which means if one of them has absorbed a weapon, they all

have.'

Beardmore frowned. 'All of them?'

'All of them of the same type. I think.'

'They're getting faster and smarter,' Daniels said.

Flynn nodded. 'We saw that before, when wolves became sabretooths. They're integrating state of the art processing power and servo motors. Now they've got unrestricted access to the ship's systems –' Beardmore scowled at that, his whole strategy was based on restricting them to certain areas – they're going to take the best tech they can.'

Beardmore rubbed his chin. 'The original animals were using twenty-first-century tech? So, how much faster are our computers?' Flynn gave a hollow laugh. 'Moore's Law.'

'Eh?'

'Computing power doubles every eighteen months.'

'So... what, a million times faster?'

'Oh no, it would have been only a million times faster in about thirty years. They've got five hundred and sixty-something years to catch up on. It's a big number. So big, it doesn't really mean much. Once they've fully adopted the computing power, they'll be smart enough and fast enough to do just about anything they want to do.'

'Sentience,' Beardmore said.

Flynn shrugged. 'I've been thinking about what Benny said. They might not need to have intelligence as such. They'll be such efficient predators that they won't really need to waste any time with it.'

'We really need to get to the bridge,' Beardmore said. He looked around, nervously, and it was tempting to think he was imagining the robots around him doubling their intelligence.

The ship approaching them was vast, but not a military or commercial vessel. Benny was no expert, but she spent a moment wondering if it was alien. Human ships, as a rule, just weren't as elegant. They were built by accountants as much as they were by engineers. Large ships weren't designed to be seen – anything much bigger than the hunters' ship couldn't fly in an atmosphere. So no money was wasted on their aesthetic appeal. Sometimes if you saw a military ship you'd be impressed by the sense of power and authority it conveyed, but that wasn't a major consideration of the designer, it was a side effect of having a big ship covered in armour plate, shield generators, missile launchers and gun turrets.

This was a beautiful ship, all sweeping curved lines and perfect proportions. No expense had been spared. It was surrounded by a weird blue swirl, like lines of magnetic force. These quickly dispersed.

Benny was more interested in the ship itself. It was too large to be a

private yacht, too refined to be even a luxury passenger liner.

Then it hit Benny that she'd been inside that ship.

There was a subsonic whine, and the faint, familiar whiff of zanium dust. Three more people now stood in the room, two of whom Benny had met.

Orlean Wolvencroft and his artificial employee Mason stood side by side. A bodyguard, who must have weighed as much as the two of them put together, stood behind, a particularly no-nonsense pistol in his hand.

Mason stepped forwards, holding what looked like a wand. He waved it over Benny, and indicated her jacket pocket. Benny took the emergency beacon from it, and Mason took it from her.

'You called, Professor Summerfield?'

Behind them, out in space, Wolvencroft's ship was moving in.

'You need to quarantine this ship,' Benny told them quickly. 'You can't dock. You probably shouldn't have transmatted over.'

Makins was looking confused. 'You work for Wolvencroft? You're a corporate spy?'

'No,' Benny snapped.

'Yes,' Wolvencroft confirmed. 'We've been monitoring her the whole time, Mr Makins.'

'What?' Benny snapped.

'As I'm sure you can imagine, I pay a lot of consultants a lot of money.' Wolvencroft smiled politely and had Mason pass Benny something. She looked down to see it was a credit screen.

'The second part of your payment,' he told her. 'Plus a little extra for exceeding my expectations.'

'You work for Wolvencroft,' Makins said. 'I thought I was a judge of people... I really had you down as some ditzy archaeologist. You do "clueless" really well. But all that time, you weren't bumbling around, stumbling on the truth. You knew exactly what you were doing. Incredible.'

Benny looked around. 'This isn't really the best time for my life story,' she announced bluntly. 'Virtually the whole of the rest of the ship is a war zone.'

Wolvencroft continued regardless. 'I'm afraid I didn't tell you the whole truth. I do collect ancient Terran space hardware. But that was a pretext for this particular mission. In the last few months, I heard rumours that the Bantu Corporation were planning to revolutionise the robot business. I got word of some new technique they'd developed, and a secret factory planet where they were building a new generation of machines. Imagine my delight when I discover that they don't have any new technique, just a natural resource. One they barely understand, by all accounts. One they certainly can't control.'

A volley of shots, a crunch of metal and an explosion from the deck below punctuated Wolvencroft's sentence for him.

'The benefits of robots that can build and repair themselves are obvious.'

'Mr Wolvencroft, they're wild animals,' Benny told him. 'They eat any metal and plastic they come across. You can hear them killing people for yourself. Look at that poor man there.'

She indicated the fallen hunter.

Wolvencroft sighed, gave little more than a token glance in the dead man's direction. 'I think we need to discuss this in private.' He barely raised his hand –

– and his guard fired at Makins. The Bantu executive raised his hand... and disintegrated, from the outside in. He evaporated in a second or two.

Benny looked away, shocked. So many people had died in front of her eyes in the last couple of days, but this death hit home for some reason. Probably because it was the very first in cold blood.

'Probably best if you hand me that gun,' Mason told Benny. She found herself passing it over, butt first.

Wolvencroft hadn't missed a beat. 'They're robots, Professor. They can be reprogrammed. On Planet 81, the supply of artificial materials is limited. On a colony planet, they would be able to eat their fill. There would be no need for aggression.'

'They'd be domesticated,' Mason chipped in.

Benny took a deep breath. 'When they consume any electronics, they gain the ability to reproduce the circuitry. They can adapt it to build themselves a better body. They have an overriding biological urge to adapt and improve.'

'Well, no they don't. They don't have a biological anything. They're machines. Look... I don't pretend there aren't challenges. But in five or ten years, every robot on the market will have this technology. Imagine a robot that upgrades itself, evolving to fit whatever job it's given, and doesn't even need to be repaired – and one that eats waste plastics and machinery.'

'And imagine the big pile of money you'll get by selling those robots to people.'

'We'd need to program in a life span, of course,' Mason said. 'Without a terminator gene, the robots could be immortal. No need to buy replacements.'

'Good thinking, Mason. Professor Summerfield, am I to take it from your pained expression that you object?'

Benny reached into her pocket. Wolvencroft looked worried, and Mason grabbed her wrist.

'I just wanted to show you something,' Benny said quietly.

‘Search her,’ Wolvencroft ordered. The guard stepped forwards, and started to frisk Benny.

‘In my jacket pocket,’ she said wearily. ‘The one I was reaching for. No, not my breasts. Enjoying searching them, are you? Gosh, you’re really going to like my buttocks, aren’t you? There you go.’

Mason looked pained. ‘I’m sorry Professor.’ He shooed the guard away, glaring at him.

Benny took out the jawbone of the fish.

Wolvencroft looked at it, then shrugged. ‘You want to break it in half and make a wish?’

‘It’s a jawbone,’ Benny said. ‘I found it in the mud.’

‘So?’

‘There were fish here. Real fish.’

Mason took the bone from her. ‘And?’

‘That’s not fossilised. It’s not actually that old. A year or two. We didn’t see any real fish, just robot ones. I know why. It’s because the robot fish competed in the same ecological niche. They wiped out the real fish.’

Mason leant in towards his master. ‘I think I understand the Professor’s position, sir.’

‘You do?’

Benny watched the two of them intently. As an artificial life form himself, perhaps Mason had an instinct for the problem. When manlikes had first been grown, the people making them had been very careful to make sure they had all the limits of a real human being. It would have been relatively easy to make them better than people, but they only lived as long, were vulnerable to the same things: they could catch a disease or die after being hit by a truck. Did Mason resent this, did he strive for an upgrade? There were rumours that it was possible, there were rumours that it wasn’t. Most of the time, people just didn’t concern themselves with it.

‘She is saying that the robots would, if introduced, be a rival species to humanity,’ Mason said. ‘One programmed to survive on worlds that support human life. One that will compete with us for resources. One that will destroy all animal life on every planet it gets a foothold on.’

Wolvencroft shook his head, patronisingly. ‘That would hardly be in my interests, would it? So I won’t let it happen. Some people think manlikes are a threat to humanity for the same reasons. Are you planning to destroy me, Mason?’

‘No, sir, not as long as the pay cheques keep coming.’

‘There you go. Cooperation. The universe is big enough for all of us, Professor.’

‘There’s fruit in the jungle,’ Benny said. ‘Flowers. They evolved alongside native animals, over millions of years. The animals eat the

fruit, the plants have their seeds spread far and wide. That's cooperation, and it evolved over millions of years. A whole ecosystem, with feedback and interdependence and the ability to adapt to most natural changes. But every insect, every bird, every fish and every mammal has been scoured from the planet. Now it's inevitable that the fruiting and flowering plants will die. It took a couple of years to kill all the animals, the plants will already have started to die. And if these robots ever leave here, they'll do the same on every planet they travel to, quickly and efficiently.'

There was another burst of gunfire from below, then a return of fire. One robot, at least, had solved the ammo problem.

'And they'll take our technology and absorb it and use it against us,' a new voice said. 'Trust me on that.'

Beardmore stood there, a pair of hunting pistols in his hands. Behind him were Flynn and a dozen more hunters, all armed.

Wolvencroft's bodyguard raised his disintegrator.

Beardmore just raised an eyebrow, and the bodyguard lowered it. 'Beardmore, I presume.'

'Your ship is not to dock with ours,' the hunter demanded. Benny glanced back, and saw that the ship was mere feet away.

'It's for your safety as much as ours,' Benny insisted.

Wolvencroft shook his head. 'We've been monitoring the situation. We have firewalls. We can contain the robots and quarantine the new tech.'

Flynn stepped forwards. 'You can't, sir. You don't have anything that will work against these things.'

Wolvencroft looked bored, and turned away, leaving it for Mason to reply.

'Miss Flynn, with respect, we've been monitoring your activities. You did very well – we'd love to hire you, once you've graduated, at a relatively senior rank. We have a formal offer waiting for you over on our ship. But we also have teams of people over there with decades of experience, and if they say we're safe, we're safe.'

Neither Wolvencroft or Mason seemed unduly worried that they had guns pointing at them.

'Where's Makins?' Beardmore asked.

'He met with an accident.'

Beardmore glanced back at the open lift shaft, but Benny caught his eye, and shook her head. Beardmore gave an imperceptible nod towards Wolvencroft. He understood.

Wolvencroft was waving his hand absently. 'Your men did a good job here, Beardmore. It's a shame Bantu, and Makins, lied to you. So many of your people have died. In return for the specimens, we'll reimburse you fully. We'll let you keep anything Makins paid you, of

course, but we'll also honour the contract. Full payment for the robots, plus death and injury benefits.'

One of the other hunters leant forward and whispered something to Beardmore, who scowled. He hesitated for a moment, then looked back to Wolvencroft.

'No.'

'Yes.' the other hunter said.

All eyes turned to the man. He was very pale-skinned, a few years younger than Beardmore, but only a few.

'Danno.' Beardmore warned.

'It's a good deal, Beardmore. More than he has to give us.'

Wolvencroft smiled. 'It's the best deal you'll get. I'll get you all the money Makins promised, plus a little extra to repair your ship and compensate you for the men you lost.'

'This isn't about money,' Beardmore growled.

'Of course not,' Wolvencroft said, with the complacency of someone who knew that it was money that made the galaxy go round.

'You can't let the robots get out into the wider galaxy,' Benny insisted.

The other hunters were looking at each other. 'It's a good deal,' one of them said. Most were nodding.

'We can't do this,' Beardmore said. 'Look. Let's put it to the vote.'

'The vote, now?' Danno laughed. 'This has never been a democracy, Beardmore. Anyway – you think you'd win a vote?'

'It's a good deal,' another of the hunters echoed.

Beardmore looked around. None of the others could look him in the eye.

'That's it, is it?' Beardmore said. He held up his pistols, and for a moment Benny thought he would try to go out in a blaze of glory. In the event, he simply handed the weapons to Danno.

Benny, Flynn and Beardmore were being marched somewhere where they could be held safely. They wanted to iron out the fine points of the deal without Beardmore and Benny interrupting. The hunters leading them around hadn't quite decided where the safe place to take them was, but were heading to the half of the ship that hadn't been overrun. All around them, they could hear the sounds of Wolvencroft's ship docking with the hunters' – clanking and hissing as the two ships clamped together.

'We've sealed off the robots, we think,' Danno told Beardmore.

'Contained them.'

'No point reporting to me now, old boy,' Beardmore murmured. 'You're the one in charge, now.'

'Look, Beardmore. We know all the men respect you. But you're

wrong about this. It's probably the blood loss affecting your judgement.'

Benny took a step back from Beardmore, fearing he was about to explode. But he made the effort to relax himself.

'You can't let them remove the robots,' Benny said.

'What?' Danno was genuinely shocked. 'Have you any idea how many of my men they've killed? How much damage they've caused? Then someone comes along and offers to take them away *and* pay us for the privilege?'

The hunters had a quick discussion, then decided to lock Benny, Flynn and Beardmore in the guest room that Benny and Flynn had used before. They were almost there. Beardmore was grateful, he said, that they were treating him humanely.

'When this is over,' Danno said, 'things will be back to normal. We'll have recruiting to do, plenty of money. You'll be back in charge, no hard feelings.'

Beardmore thanked him, a scowl not far from his face.

Danno had someone sent to fetch some more painkillers for Beardmore, then they were left alone.

The old hunter sat on the bed. Flynn slumped in a chair.

'We can't let them do this,' Benny said.

'I know,' Beardmore said wearily.

'We have to get out,' she said. 'We have to do something.'

Beardmore stood. 'Patience.'

'We don't have much time.'

Beardmore nodded, and moved over to the door. 'I know.'

He tapped something into the door control, and it opened. The guard, surprised that the door wasn't locked, didn't have time to react. Beardmore broke his neck.

'Treacherous little turd,' he said, before looking up, his conscience clear. 'Okay, Benny, what's the plan?'

They headed to the hangar bay.

'There's that courier rocket,' Beardmore said. 'It's faster than our ship, and probably faster than Wolvencroft's.'

'What do we do?' asked Flynn.

Beardmore shrugged. 'We get to the nearest planet and warn them.'

'The nearest inhabited planet is Petuaria,' Flynn said. 'I'm not sure what they could do.'

'Wolvencroft has money,' Benny said. 'He'll buy his way out of trouble. Or he'll use it to delay the authorities. Anyway, no-one on Petuaria is going to shoot down the ships. They'll impound them.'

'As opposed to?' Beardmore asked.

'Destroying them,' Benny said. 'That's what we have to do.'

'You'd kill hundreds of people?'

Benny slumped. 'If the robots get out, they could kill billions. But... no. I can't kill them.'

'It's academic anyway. The courier rocket isn't armed,' Beardmore said. 'It's a hyperdrive, ten seats and a cargo hold.'

The ship lurched, suddenly.

'Careless driving,' Beardmore noted.

'No,' said Flynn. 'I think it was the gravity waves. Two ships with big engines locked together like this will affect the balance of the forces here.'

'The drive of this ship was disabled,' Benny reminded her.

Flynn was clearly recalculating something in her head. 'Doesn't matter, it's all to do with mass and residual energy.'

'I'll take your word for it,' Beardmore laughed.

'We need to destroy the hyperdrive on Wolvencroft's ship,' Benny said.

'That will blow up both ships.'

'Not if we can eject it first.'

Flynn was shaking her head. 'The robots will still be able to take the technology and build a hyperdrive.'

Benny smiled. 'Yes, but how would they fuel it?'

'We can't get to the engine room,' Beardmore said. 'There's one dock, and that'll be the focus of activity for the crews of both ships. They'll already be passing the robots to the hold of Wolvencroft's ship. Everything will have to go through the dock.'

'So we'd have to fight our way through this ship, then through the dock, then through Wolvencroft's yacht.'

'Then to the engine room,' Beardmore told her. 'Which, if it's like every other engine room on every other ship in the galaxy, will be heavily manned and surrounded by security. It's a critical area of the ship.'

'Could we transmat over?'

'What? No. There's been over five hundred years for naval architects to build in precautions.'

'It can be hacked,' Flynn said.

Benny and Beardmore turned to her.

'Get me to the sending chamber,' Flynn insisted.

The transmat sending chamber wasn't very far away at all. Once again, the corridors of the ship were deserted. The hunters were either helping Wolvencroft's men or back in their rooms, licking their wounds.

There was a technician in the transmat room. Rather than let Beardmore kill him, Benny knocked him out with a quick chop.

Beardmore looked impressed, but it wasn't a skill Benny was proud of.

'They'll detect anyone teleporting across,' she said, changing the subject. 'Especially into a critical area like an engine room.'

'Nall,' said Flynn. 'Look, this is a standard Pentalion transmat. The kids at college are always hacking into these to get free rides. We can come and go without leaving a trace.' She was already popping off one of the side panels of the device.

'You've done that, too?' Benny asked.

'No... it's illegal and... well, no, I –' She was blushing.

'And what?'

'Well... it's not what the transmat is designed to do. There are risks. Some of the stuff you can do is cool. Boyfriends and girlfriends can end up in each other's bodies, at least until they transmat again. A bloke in my class who did that swore it was the best sex she –'

'You better believe it,' said Benny, before stopping herself. 'Um... I have had some experience of body swapping and so on over the years. Good, bad and ugly. On the whole, if it's all right with you, I'd like to avoid all that. I'll go alone. If I do that, it'll keep things simple.'

'I'm going,' insisted Beardmore.

'No. For a start, you look like you're about to pass out.'

'My knee is fine.'

'Your knee was blown off, and is only hanging there on the medical equivalent of a thread. Besides, you can't operate the engine to eject it.'

'You can?' Beardmore asked.

'Well,' Benny said. 'On the journey over to this system I looked after a ship's engine. I guess that makes me the most qualified person here. The first thing you learn is the emergency eject. Beam me back the moment the drive is released.'

Wolvencroft took up position on the bridge of his yacht. Not the Captain's seat, that was reserved for Captain Anderson, but a far more throne-like affair to one side of all the control panels and status displays. This was a far more beautiful place than the bridge of the hunters' ship. Everything gleamed and curved and was made of the finest materials. The seats were hand-stitched Kalkravian leather, the consoles were of the finest jabolite, inlaid with gold.

Mason came over, gripping three small handheld computers. 'The hunters are cooperating,' he reported. 'Their leader has an interesting suggestion.'

Danno was here. He moved over to Wolvencroft at his bidding, clearly in awe at the luxury of his surroundings.

'Sir, my ship's out of fuel, and it's damaged. Plus we're having problems herding some types of the robots onto your ship. I suggest

you just tow us to the nearest planet. Deal with the problem there, where there are more facilities.'

Wolvencroft considered that for a moment. 'I want the robots under control,' he said. 'We can't have them on the loose.'

'I appreciate that, sir. But if we could pick up some EMP guns from Petuaria, we could just knock them all out. Makins was very concerned about using hi-tech weapons, so we've got very little on board that we can use.'

'That man was a fool,' Mason concluded.

Wolvencroft nodded. Mason turned round and hurried over to Captain Anderson to make the necessary arrangements.

Benny materialised in the engine room of Wolvencroft's yacht.

She was alone, for the moment at least. No alarms were ringing, so it looked like Flynn's hack of the transmat system had worked.

The rest of Wolvencroft's ship had been elegant on Benny's last visit, but this looked like every other starship's engine room. Vast machinery pumped and hissed away. The hyperdrive unit itself was one of the least impressive things here. It resembled the one Benny had tended on the *Sataspes*, in the same way a shrew resembled an elephant. It was the same shape as the one she was used to, just a great deal larger, and was humming quietly to itself, as if it was smug that it could tie space-time up in knots that no human being could possibly comprehend, let alone disentangle.

Looking at it, she imagined that the control panel would also be a mammoth version of the one of the *Sataspes*, but it was exactly the same, with only a handful of added buttons and other controls. Benny used it to locate the locking clamps. There were three levers to pull to get the hyperdrive to launch away from the ship, all positioned around the engine room so that no-one could accidentally pull them all.

The first was right by the control panel. It was huge, the sort of lever they'd used in ancient railway signal boxes. Benny tugged it, locked it into the new position, and killed the alarm that sounded with a laser cutter Flynn had found in a toolbox in the transmat sending chamber.

Too late. She'd attracted the attention of an engineer. A young woman, not much older than Flynn. Benny saw her coming, and knocked her out cold.

She quickly moved round to the next lever, which was off in the direction the engineer had come from. Hopefully that meant it was an unmanned position.

'Now hear this. Now hear this. Engineering crew, prepare for the jump to hyperdrive.'

Benny went cold. The engineering crew on a ship like this would run into dozens, and most of them would now be heading her way. When they arrived to prepare the hyperdrive, the very first thing they would do was make sure it was locked into place.

She pulled the second lever, then hurried round to kill the alarm. It wouldn't shut up. She set her cutter to the highest setting and blew out the speaker. Unfortunately, she also blew out the display screen.

Benny wished she'd made a note of where the last lever was before she'd done that. On the plan of the engine room, the levers had formed a rough triangle. But she couldn't remember in which direction that meant the last lever would be.

She didn't have much time to ponder the point.

There was a pack of wolves in the hangar bay.

Beardmore and Flynn had no weapons, and the animals were quite happy gnawing on an aircar.

'They do seem partial to those things,' Beardmore noted.

The courier rocket was above them, lashed to the ceiling with hydraulic cables.

'Dammit,' Beardmore said. 'I've never had to do this myself. Where's the button you press to lower it?'

Flynn looked up. 'I don't think it's meant to look like that. I think it's been caught in something.'

Beardmore pointed up. 'Those cables.'

'I don't think they're cables.'

Beardmore frowned.

'It looks more like a spider's web,' Flynn said quietly.

* * * *

Benny had found the last lever just as the engine room had started to fill up with officers and technicians. It was in a quiet corner. She was backed into a nook just three or four metres from it, now Crewmen kept hurrying past. No-one had seen her, but even if she wasn't caught, it wasn't going to take the crew long to spot someone had tried to sabotage the engine. Benny decided to go for a simple distraction technique.

There was a trick she'd learned during her military training. Rather, it was one of those things that all the recruits did and quickly stopped doing, if only for reasons of Darwinism. If you put the power cell of a laser pistol in upside-down and the wrong way round, you overloaded the cell and it exploded. When it exploded was a little... unpredictable. The official guidelines said between zero and fifteen seconds. When it took 'zero' seconds, the results tended to be messy.

Benny took out the power cell, carefully fitted it back in an

incompetently lethal manner, then threw the pistol down a handy access duct.

She ran for the third lever.

A large metal spider was now sitting over it.

Benny clarified her definition. A large spider could be a few inches across. By the time it was the width of a saucer, you could probably make a case to most people that it was 'a large spider'. Even the most hardened spider watcher would concede that one with a body the size of, say, a toaster was indeed 'a large spider'. They would also, even if they quite liked spiders, tend to want to not go near it if it could be avoided.

This was about the size of an aircar.

It wasn't a maintenance drone or some natural part of Wolvencroft's ship. It glistened with exotic alloys and each leg seemed to have some kind of weapon on it. This was a robot that had clearly enjoyed its exploration of the hunters' ship, and made productive visits to storerooms, tool lockers and the armoury.

She'd not seen a robot like it on the surface. Perhaps, only a few hours ago, it had been the size of a normal spider.

It had a metal tube sticking from its maw, and had used it to puncture a hole into one of the thick pipes leading from the hyperdrive. It was draining energy from the ship, sucking it up through its equivalent of a drinking straw.

Its head rotated round, fixing eight red camera eyes on Benny, who was beginning to regret throwing her gun away.

Talking of which, an explosion far behind her filled the room with noise and, after a moment, smoke. Benny didn't turn back, but could hear the engineers calling out for fire precautions.

The robot spider was still looking at her. Benny considered her next move carefully.

'Fire in the engine room,' one of the pilots called out.

Wolvencroft looked up. 'Mason, what's going on?'

The manlike was at a display screen. 'Small explosion registered. I'm picking up a robot down there, too.'

'A robot got across and is causing explosions? How?'

Mason pressed a few controls. 'It spun a web,' he said, admiringly. The display showed a line of metal cable running from the hangar bay of the hunters' ship to the hull of their own.

'I think it must have abseiled across,' Danno said.

'Cut its way through the hull?' Anderson asked.

'Or just found some access vent.'

'Why is it making things explode?' Wolvencroft demanded.

Mason, Anderson and Danno all shrugged.

‘Courier rocket launched from the hunters’ ship,’ another pilot called out.

‘That’s not authorised,’ Danno assured them.

‘A robot?’ Anderson asked.

‘They’ve not demonstrated any ability to use our technology, only to adopt it.’

‘Mason,’ Wolvencroft said, trying to stay calm, ‘could you please try to exercise some control over this situation?’

The lever was directly under the spider.

It wouldn’t be possible to just throw something and dislodge the lever. It was more like an old handbrake – it would need to be squeezed and released.

This would involve diving underneath the spider.

The ship rocked again. Another gravity distortion.

Suddenly, there was a man between her and the spider. Mason had transmatted in. He was holding a machine gun.

‘You,’ he said.

Benny smiled, in way she hoped would be literally disarming. ‘It is, as you say, me.’

Mason raised the gun. ‘Not for much longer.’

‘How long would a manlike last in a vacuum?’ she asked quickly.

‘The same as you. Perhaps a few moments longer.’

‘Good. Do you think you’re “technology” by the way?’

Mason ran his smile subroutine again. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Just curious whether you and that spider would agree.’

Benny started running towards him. Mason held his arms out, ready to catch her.

The movement was enough to provoke the spider into action. Four of its legs shot out, all of them piercing Mason’s back. He was lifted up. Despite that, he managed to fire the machine gun. By then, though, Benny had already dived under his feet, rolled beneath the spider, and slammed into the lever, hard enough to nearly break her hand.

‘The robots prefer technology to people,’ she told him. ‘They have a taste for you.’

She tugged down on the lever, pulled hard.

The hyperdrive dropped out of the ship, down a magnetically accelerated emergency chute. The spider, attached to the engine by its feeding tube, did the same, only more clumsily. Most messy of all was Mason, who was attached to the spider.

At the last moment, Mason reached down and grabbed Benny, yanking her along with them. She tipped over the edge, already knowing that all the wriggling free she was doing wouldn’t help her one bit.

All around her, blue/grey glowing power lines. This was a fifty metre long tube with the engine room at one end and outer space at the other. A powerful electromagnet, designed to fire the hyperdrive away from the ship at supersonic speeds. The magnetic force was also enough to tug the spider into three big chunks, and started pulling at the metal in Mason's suit buttons, watch and belt.

Benny, her clothes still free of any metals or plastics, was unaffected. Ten feet below her, space. Just the void. No air, no heat, lots of radiation.

She was shooting towards the vacuum.

As she passed the threshold, she watched the hyperdrive shoot away from the ship like a bullet. The spider was dashed to pieces by the force. Mason was clutching his throat, veins bulging, his wounds already freezing over.

She could see the courier rocket, already just a silver speck in space, powering away from the larger ships, both of which were now crippled.

It would only take a moment, and if they were far enough from the planet, and the ejection system had pointed them on a favourable course, then their freeze-dried bodies might drift through space, relatively untouched, for hundreds of millions of years.

Benny was just drawing some comfort from that idea when she felt the tug of a transmat beam, and melted away.

The courier rocket punched its way out of normal space, throwing itself into the hyperspace current, letting it be carried far, far away from Planet 81.

Wolvencroft watched all this on the display screens.

'What was she thinking?' he asked. 'Emergency transmat. Get Mason back aboard and to an engineer. Then bring us round to retrieve the hyperdrive.'

Anderson nodded. 'A temporary setback,' he said. 'Professor Summerfield might be a good archaeologist, but she's hardly a brilliant tactician. In ten minutes we'll have the drive back aboard, in twenty we can be underway.'

'Anyway, now she's gone, we can –'

'Sir...'

Wolvencroft turned to look at the display screen. Space was marked out with great silver-blue arcs. It was beautiful, like an aurora.

'What is it?'

'The departure of the courier rocket has set off a gravity shockwave, sir. The gravity distortions are unstable, and it's like an avalanche –'

'Spend your time getting us out of here, rather than on the metaphors, please Captain!'

‘Aye, Sir!’

The ship displays started to flicker.

‘What now?’

‘Sir... the computers have been infiltrated.’

‘How? Summerfield’s ship is out of range.’

‘It’s coming from the planet.’

The lights went off, and so did the thrusters.

Flynn was playing with the long-range detectors. Benny was getting her breath back. Beardmore was watching the screen intently. ‘Got it,’ Flynn said finally.

A blip on a monitor. The hunters’ ship and Wolvencroft’s, still locked together. Now, the dot was drifting towards Planet 81, on savage tides of gravity. The exploding hyperdrives had been like boulders thrown into a lake.

‘There’s no energy signature from the big ship,’ Beardmore said.

‘It’s being region hacked,’ Flynn told them.

The dot was now almost at the planet.

‘They’ll survive the crash,’ Benny said. ‘They’ll have no way of leaving the planet. But there’s always the colony buildings the probe built. Fertile soil, good climate.’

‘Armies of savage, relentless robots,’ Flynn reminded her.

Danno’s hunters will cope,’ Beardmore said, almost smugly. Was he a callous man, Benny wondered, or just someone who appreciated poetic justice? Either way, she found it easy to sympathise with him.

The detector screen was flickering, now.

‘We’ve not been hacked?’ Benny panicked.

‘No. The gravity distortions. It’s blocking out just about everything.’

‘The people on those ships will be on their own,’ Beardmore said.

‘We set off quite a disruption of the gravity field,’ Flynn said. It’ll be at least a decade before any ships will be able to get into the system on hyperdrive’

‘Only we will know they are there,’ Benny said.

Flynn held her breath for a moment.

‘Our secret?’ Beardmore asked.

‘I did want to have a planet named after me,’ Flynn said softly. ‘And I do feel a bit guilty.’

‘Our secret,’ Benny said. ‘If anyone goes looking for them, they’ll find the robots.’

‘We’ll have enough explaining to do when we get back home as it is,’ Flynn noted. ‘Our secret.’

Benny nodded. ‘Do you know if Johannsen had a family?’

‘He was married,’ Flynn said without a hint of guilt. ‘Three kids.’

Benny’s heart sank. ‘Well, what Wolvencroft paid me should see them right.’ The words felt empty as she formulated them. She felt

sick saying it.

‘We lost a lot of good men,’ Beardmore said. ‘And condemned many more to death.’

Benny sat back. ‘Alone in the Garden of Eden.’ She looked at the detector screen one last time, but it was just static, now. Benny looked out at the stars, remembered the warm water of the Tree dome against her skin, the sense of being alone, the sense of any number of possible futures. The potential of the place, the hope of centuries that had led to its creation.

‘I almost envy them,’ she admitted.

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